

INDIAN WARS: FAILINGS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY
TO ACHIEVE DECISIVE VICTORY DURING
THE NEZ PERCE WAR OF 1877

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the US Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2004

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 17-06-2005		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) Aug 2004 - Jun 2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Indian Wars: Failings of the United States Army to Achieve Decisive Victory During the Nez Perce War of 1877				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJ Mathyn D. Williams				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD 1 Reynolds Ave. Ft. Leavenworth, KS 66027-1352				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT In 1877 the United States waged war against the "nontreaty" Nez Perce. For four months, the war unfolded along a 1,350-mile trail stretching from Oregon to the Bear's Paw Mountains in Montana. Masters of their weaponry and excellent horsemen, the Nez Perce presented a cunning enemy who mixed their traditional ways of battle with the use of modern rifles. When hostilities began with the Nez Perce, the Army was a relatively small force having been drawn down to 27,000 men, many of whom were Civil War veterans. Among them, the Army inherited a lot of older officers who, at times, struggled with the physical demands associated with pursuing and fighting against the unorthodox Indians. At the time of the Nez Perce War, the Army was transitioning to adopt and train to its newly developed war doctrine. Another complication for the Army was the lack of understanding the Indian's culture and fighting-style. That misunderstanding often resulted in miscalculations and underestimations being made that led to the Army getting out maneuvered, outflanked, and soundly beaten in several battles with Nez Perce warriors. Adding to the Army's difficulties was the presence of political infighting among several members of the senior leadership.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Nez Perce, Unorthodox Indian fighting, warriors, war doctrine					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 135	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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ABSTRACT

INDIAN WARS: FAILINGS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY TO ACHIEVE DECISIVE VICTORY DURING THE NEZ PERCE WAR OF 1877, by MAJ Mathyn D. Williams, ARNG, 135 pages.

In 1877 the United States waged war against the “nontreaty” Nez Perce. For four months, the war unfolded along a 1,350-mile trail stretching from Oregon to the Bear’s Paw Mountains in Montana. Masters of their weaponry and excellent horsemen, the Nez Perce presented a cunning enemy who mixed their traditional ways of battle with the use of modern rifles. When hostilities began with the Nez Perce, the Army was a relatively small force having been drawn down to 27,000 men, many of whom were Civil War veterans. Among them, the Army inherited a lot of older officers who, at times, struggled with the physical demands associated with pursuing and fighting against the unorthodox Indians. At the time of the Nez Perce War, the Army was transitioning to adopt and train to its newly developed war doctrine. Another complication for the Army was the lack of understanding the Indian’s culture and fighting-style. That misunderstanding often resulted in miscalculations and underestimations being made that led to the Army getting out maneuvered, outflanked, and soundly beaten in several battles with Nez Perce warriors. Adding to the Army’s difficulties was the presence of political infighting among several members of the senior leadership.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go to the people that assisted me during the last year in the writing of this thesis. First and foremost, thanks go to my wife Rose Ann who spent countless hours taking care of our household and me while I researched and wrote this thesis during many weekends and nights. Further heartfelt thanks go to my committee: Dr. Don Wright for having the monumental task of teaching me how to write a thesis paper, making editorial comments, and keeping my thesis on track; Major Dave Christensen for recommending the topic to me when I was struggling to find one and for getting me motivated, and Mr. Kelvin Crow who took time from his busy schedule to guide me in the ways of breaking history down to find the truth, while allowing me time to discuss my topic. Also, to Ms. Helen Davis for her professional and courteous support that made my paper an acceptable document; I could not have done it without her. In addition, thanks to my family back home in Mississippi who communicated their support and pride in me for my endeavor to learn more about the sacrifices of our forefathers--both immigrant and Native American Indian--in the development of this great nation. Furthermore, I thank the Army and CGSC staff for giving me the opportunity to serve with such professionals. Lastly, but of great importance to me, I thank my creator who revealed to me during this study his boundless love while showing me that His way is the perfect way, and who gave me the understanding that all people are His people, and none should be forsaken, but instead should be shown the way to eternal life through the exercise of religious freedom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1877 war broke out between the United States (US) Government and the “nontreaty band” of Nee-Me-Poo Indians (commonly known as Nez Perce). This particular group was known as the “nontreaty” band of Nez Perce because they refused to accept the US Government’s treaty demands aimed at removing their tribe from the Wallowa Valley to a small reservation in Idaho. This band of Nez Perce followed the younger Chief Joseph famous for his speech of surrender at the Bears Paw Battle 5 October 1877 “Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”¹ The nontreaty Nez Perce felt that they did not need to honor past agreements between the US Government and chiefs of other bands, who presumed to speak for all Nez Perce. The original homeland of the Nez Perce covered an area of approximately eleven thousand square miles and was defended fiercely by the Indians.² It stretched westward from the Bitterroot mountain range of Montana--encompassing the Clearwater Mountains and the grassy Camas Prairie--to include the Blue Mountain ranges and valleys in what is today northeastern Oregon. But in 1863 the US Government demanded a new treaty with the Nez Perce. In the new treaty the Nez Perce would relinquish all lands in the Washington Territory and the state of Oregon, drastically reducing the reservation to approximately one-tenth of its 1855 size.³ To the Nez Perce, this was a devastating order, as it demanded that they move to a much smaller portion of land located inside the Lapwai Valley. Accepting this treaty meant that they would no longer be allowed to occupy all of the Wallowa Valley which they used primarily for grazing.⁴ After Chief Joseph and the council of other Nez Perce chiefs

refused the US directive presented to them by General Oliver Otis Howard, they began a defiant campaign of evasion mixed with short skirmishes and battles that lasted for four months. During the four-month war that stretched nearly 1,350 miles, men from US Army infantry regiments, cavalry regiments, and an artillery unit waged war against the Nez Perce in twelve separate battles, yet failed to achieve decisive victory.

Though outnumbered and outgunned by the Army's soldiers and burdened with noncombatant villagers, the Nez Perce managed to prevail against or evade the Army time and again as they withdrew along a well-worn route known as the Lolo Trail and into the Bitterroot Mountains and Buffalo territory of Montana before finally surrendering due to exhaustion.

After their surrender, the surviving Nez Perce were forced into internment and exile. Eventually, some members of the Nez Perce tribe were allowed to return to their land, but others were forced to live on the nearby Colville Indian Reservation in Washington State. There, Chief Joseph remained with a group of his people and did what he could to encourage them to go to school and to avoid unhealthy vices, such as gambling and drunkenness.

This thesis examines the US Government and Nez Perce Indian to answer the question of why the US Army failed to achieve decisive victory over the Nez Perce in 1877. The term "decisive victory" is defined as "an unmistakable defeat of one's opponent during battle that renders its force combat ineffective and incapable of continuing the fight, or to maneuver freely at the conclusion of battle (defeated beyond doubt)."⁵

To answer the question of why the Army failed to decisively defeat the Nez Perce Indians in the War of 1877, this paper examines the American Indian and the Frontier

Army. When examining the Army from 1865 until 1877, several issues become evident in that they affected the execution of the government at the strategic level, as well as the Army at the operational level. Issues such as bipartisan politics; the economic strain of conducting war and peacekeeping operations, and the influence of personal prejudices and hatreds toward Indians that existed within professional government organizations all led to indecisiveness, poor preparation for the Army, and poor support for its commanders.

This paper is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 describes the political environment of the government after the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and introduces the conditions that led to war with the nontreaty band of Nez Perce.

Chapter 2 examines the culture, religion, and abilities of the Nez Perce Indians, explains why they chose war with the US, and how they were able to prevail against the Army in thirteen battles and engagements during the Nez Perce War.

Chapter 3 addresses the difficulties experienced by the US Government during its negotiations with Western Plains Indians during the mid-to-late eighteen hundreds, and analyzes the government's strategy for western expansion. To help explain why the US Army failed to achieve decisive victory during the Nez Perce War, chapter 3 illuminates the serious leadership problems that existed in the government before and during the war; problems that directly affected the Army's ability to fight. These leadership problems contributed to poor command and control, low morale among soldiers, and weak performance by Army officers during encounters with the unconventional Nez Perce warrior.

Chapter 4 identifies the Army's operational and tactical methods for combating hostile Indians and demonstrates why the Army failed and how the Nez Perce succeeded during the four-month war.

The conclusion chapter provides lessons that were learned by the US Government during the Nez Perce War that can be related to current and future conflicts with enemies that possess similar characteristics and strengths as those seen in the Western Plains Indians. These lessons may provide valuable information for Army commanders preparing to combat an enemy which employs the use of guerrilla tactics in an unconventional war.

Throughout each chapter, it shall be demonstrated that the Army's failures can be contributed to a myriad of problems--many of which were directly linked to political pressures from within the government--with the following problems representing the root of the Army's failure.

First, during the time of the Nez Perce War, the Army was going through a period of changing doctrine and strategic guidance that led to indecisiveness and an atmosphere of poor leadership. That period of poor leadership prevailed during the middle eighteen hundreds and contributed to a lack of effective command and control during engagements with the Nez Perce. Examples of this are seen throughout this thesis as they occurred in varying degrees during all of the encounters with the Nez Perce. The first battle of the Nez Perce War was at Whitebird Canyon and is analyzed in this chapter. This battle shocked the US Government and demonstrated how poor command and control contributed to the Army's failures during the Nez Perce War and illustrates how effective

the Indians were at compensating for inferior numbers and firepower by using deception and guerrilla tactics.

Second, due to the great cost associated with the Civil War and battling hostile Indians, the government failed to adequately fund the Army during the Plains Indian wars. This lack of funding impacted the commander's abilities to deliver overwhelming force against hostile Indians because of low manpower, obsolete equipment, and inadequate training. After the Whitebird Canyon Battle, regimental commander Captain David Perry was ordered to appear in a US court of inquiry to explain his devastating loss to the Nez Perce. He blamed the loss on inadequate training and insufficient ammunition. The court accepted his testimony as factual and cleared him of dereliction during his command.⁶

Third, prior to the Nez Perce War, the Army force structure had undergone drastic downsizing that left units well below recommended manning strength, causing commanders to take measures, such as grouping multiple companies together just to make a complete company. For example, at the Big Hole Battle, Colonel Gibbons used six companies of the 7th Infantry to fight the Nez Perce, but the companies only had an average of twenty-four men per company instead of the recommended forty men.⁷

Fourth, the caliber of soldier that fought the Indians was often less than stellar due to cultural issues, low morale related to pay problems, a lack of civilian education, poor military training, and the hardships associated with soldiering in the Frontier Army.

Finally, cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings about Indian culture existed within the government in 1877. Those feelings led to poor diplomacy toward Indians, as well as miscalculations and underestimations of their abilities; all of which translated to

operational and tactical blunders for the Army as it battled with the Nez Perce. Examples of those operational and tactical blunders will be seen in the description of each battle illustrated in this chapter.

Several sources chronicle the events of the Nez Perce conflict and flight along the Lolo Trail, along with the actions of the US Army, which tried to subdue them along the way. Most sources either romanticize about the heroics of the Nez Perce as defenders of their homeland or demonize them as pagans who were indicative of the Indian problem. One of the best sources used for research to answer the thesis question contained in this paper is *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War* written by historian Merrill D. Beal in 1963. It is based on firsthand accounts and personal interviews that describe the events that shaped the culture of the Nez Perce people and led to the four-month war with the US Army in 1877. It should be noted that Beal seems to have a pro-Nez Perce bias, as he depicts Chief Joseph as a hero, great leader, and diplomat.

Another important account is the *Children of Grace: The Nez Perce War of 1877*, written by Bruce Hampton in 1994. Hampton draws upon original documents, letters, diaries, manuscripts, and oral histories as well as eyewitness accounts and a personal study of the actual terrain traveled during the war to provide a valuable insight into the personalities of the Nez Perce people. Hampton's narrative provides a detailed account of the incidents that occurred between the US Government and the Nez Perce chiefs to show how the Nez Perce were provoked to war after being driven from their land through acts of deceit committed by the government's agents and after witnessing injustices committed against their tribesmen by local settlers. His story captures the plight of both

the Nez Perce people and the US soldiers who were forced to deal with poor policy for managing Indian relations and land treaties.

Important primary sources include the book *Fighting Indians! In The Seventh United States Cavalry: Custer's Favorite Regiment*, by Ami Frank Mulford. Mr. Mulford's detailed account provides valuable information about what it was actually like to be an enlisted soldier in the Army during the Nez Perce War. Mulford served under the command of Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis during Sturgis' pursuit of the Nez Perce and was present with General Nelson A. Miles when Miles finally subdued the Nez Perce at the Bear Paw Mountains, in October 1877. Mulford's description of events related to Army training, life in the field, personal hardships, relationships with other soldiers, and personal encounters with Indians is very interesting, amusing, and enlightening. Author Roy Johnson's book, *Jacob Horner of the Seventh Cavalry*, and historian L.V. McWhorter's *Hear Me My Chiefs: The Nez Perce History and Legend* contribute to answering the thesis question by providing information from primary sources that provide insight into the lives of the frontier soldier and the Army's operations on the western plains while illustrating the hardships and misunderstandings officers and enlisted men dealt with--hardships that contributed to many of their failures when battling Indians.

By examining the culture of the Native American Indian and by focusing on the Nez Perce as one of the last holdouts who stood in the way of US western expansion, one can develop a greater understanding for why the Army often failed to accomplish its mission to defeat hostile Indians.

This war pitted the nontreaty Nez Perce warriors comprised of less than 300 men against 2,000 US Army soldiers, countless citizen volunteers, and ten different hostile Indian tribes.⁸ The Army units that engaged the nontreaty band of Nez Perce were expected to possess the numerical strength, training, firepower, and support to quickly defeat the band and to force them onto the reservation. During the war, the Army failed to decisively defeat the Indians in any of the thirteen battles and engagements fought over a four-month period, along a 1,350-mile trek, prior to the Bear Paw Battle that resulted in the Nez Perce finally surrendering due to exhaustion.

By 1876, most of the Indian tribes of North America were defeated and had submitted to US land treaties that relegated them to reservations. The only real threats to US expansion were the Indians that were located west of the Mississippi river, in the vast part of the country not yet inhabited by large numbers of white settlers.

By 1877, along with the great Sioux nation, the Nez Perce were among the most powerful of the many tribes of American Indians who ruled the West; in the areas now know as Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.⁹ After putting up many valiant fights, and inflicting a great number of casualties on the Army, all of the most powerful Indians were either defeated in battle or forced to accept treaties to save their people from the devastation of protracted warfare, and only stopped fighting after realizing that it was futile to stand against the power of the US Government.

It took a great power to force the American Indian to surrender their land and culture. With all of its faults, the US Government was powerful enough to accomplish that mission, because the people behind the government represented a cultural force that

invaded the Indian's very way of life, and those individuals were critical to shaping strategy and policy toward Indians, the Nez Perce in particular.

One serious problem that faced military leaders in the post-Civil War Frontier Army was that the government's official policies and strategic goals used to settle and secure the western frontier changed too often during the tumultuous years between 1865 and 1880. Public opinion, the press, economic influences like discoveries of gold and silver, and political infighting between Republicans and Democrats too often influenced these policies.

Posturing for the support of their constituents, many politicians made matters worse for the government as negotiations over land treaties developed. In his book, *The Nez Percés*, historian Francis Haines wrote: "When the whites in the Northwest kept agitating for the government to protect them from savages, Congress asked the Indian Bureau for a list of white men killed in that section."¹⁰

This is an example of politicians looking for an excuse to remove (all Indians) from their land. Though some whites had been killed by Indians in the Nez Perce territory, there was no proof that any member of the Nez Perce had done the killing, and most cases were known to have been the result of hostilities committed by other bands. Though some Indians did commit violent acts against whites, it was not fair to treat all the Indians the same. Variations and ideas among the leadership of the government on how to deal with Indians can be seen by comparing President Grant's Peace Policy which emphasized "conquest by kindness," and Commanding General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman's method of total war. Colonel de Trobriand acknowledged that the aim of total war "was to exterminate everyone."¹¹ Sherman countered; the practice was

moral and humane as it brought about “an end to the Indians in a quicker and more decisive way.”¹² Prior to the Nez Perce War--demonstrating the prejudices and stereotypes some white men held toward Indians--a group of eight settlers approached a Nez Perce camp and accused one of them of stealing horses. The Nez Perce denied stealing and told the men that they had seen the horses, and where the settlers could find them, but the Indians did not have them. The settlers returned the next morning and shot one of the Nez Perce. Even then, the Nez Perce did not retaliate. Later, a white settler named Harry White whipped two Indians because they did not get off of a trail as soon as he rode up. Afterward, the Nez Perce lodged complaints with the local authorities about these incidents, but Indians were not recognized in the courts when their complaints were against white men, so nothing was done.

Even though the justice system did not seem to apply punishment to whites when the crimes were against Indians, the local settlers still wanted more of an advantage against Indians and began lobbying the local and federal agents to remove all Indians from the territory that had belonged to natives for countless years.¹³

Because of the citizen’s disdain for Indians, they judged the Army harshly when it did not quickly subdue the Nez Perce after the outbreak of hostilities. Describing public opinion of the Army as it tracked the Nez Perce through Butte and Helena, Montana (as well as the ineptness of the Army), the *Helena Daily Herald* stated:

How easy any Indian force, whether seeking pillage or only escape, could pass around, through and by our untrained troops. So far as infantry goes, except to defend the larger towns or some fortified position, they are as useless as boys with popguns.¹⁴

In defense of the US leadership, because the actions of Plains Indians were not all the same from one band to the other, the government’s strategic goals and policies had to

change to meet the different requirements. The knowledge necessary to adequately understand all of the different nuances between Indian tribes and social hierarchies among their chiefs, would have taken any one of the men responsible for dealing with them a great deal of time for an in-depth cultural study; similar to the relationship that T. E. Lawrence later developed while serving as a British officer and liaison with the leaders of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). Unfortunately, that amount of time was not made available to the US leadership prior to going to war with the Plains Indians.

Like the Army's cultural and social ideas, the doctrine for fighting along with the operational and tactical procedures used in battle also had to change, especially after the end of the era of linear warfare used during the Civil War.

After the Civil War ended, the battered US finally began putting together the pieces of its nation, while trying to mend relationships between families, politicians and departments of government. It was now time for the country to resume its westward expansion in earnest, and to seek a claim on that amazing land explored by Lewis and Clark at the turn of the century. After the country repaired the railroad system damaged during the Civil War; laid new railroad tracks across the western plains, and opened its lines of communication (LOC) to the South and West, thousands of American settlers began to move more freely into the new territory. The new American settlers were mainly comprised of native-born US citizens from the East and South; recent immigrants from European countries, and newly freed slaves. All of them were ready to begin seeking their fortune out West. They were ready to grab the ideal of Manifest Destiny and to establish homesteads for raising families, cattle, and crops. Some dreamed of exploring the new territory's vast natural resources in hopes of striking it rich. The new settlers

were full of hope, excitement, and the promise of a new life. They were optimistic, proud, and tough; and they were determined to claim their piece of the American dream, regardless of the potential dangers associated with traveling into the unsettled region.

Of all the challenges the great West held for the settlers, such as rough terrain, inclement weather, swollen rivers, and wild animals, there was one challenge they were not fully prepared to deal with. That challenge confronted them in the form of another optimistic, proud, and determined group of people who came in many different alliances, but were truly all part of one undeniably formidable race of people known as the Native American Indian.

By the time white settlers began moving in large numbers to inhabit the lands west of the Mississippi River many tribes from the nations of American Indians had already been there for hundreds, if not thousands of years tending to the earth that most Indians described in terms like “The Great Mother.”¹⁵ With all of its harshness, the Indians loved the land for what it gave them. The earth sustained their life and fed their villages with rivers of fish, fields of camas roots, forests full of berries, and wide-opened plains dotted with the great buffalo. The Indians were not a race of wasteful people.

Though most of them were not farmers in the sense that the white settlers were, they still nurtured the land and revered it--only killing what they needed, and building their entire livelihood around the wild beast, the sun, mountains, waters, and forest. To the Nez Perce, their existence was intricately linked with their overriding relationship with the land. They revered the earth as the life force for all living things. They considered it imperative that they lived and died on the land that had been set aside for them and nurtured by “The Great Father.”¹⁶

As they were very territorial and protective of their hunting grounds and villages, the Indians did not understand the white man's concept of owning the land, and found it difficult to relate to the US Government during land treaty negotiations. Though many chiefs did enter into land deals and treaties with the Indian agents, they really did not grasp the ramifications attached to selling the land. To the Indians, selling the land was like selling the sun, or moon, or stars. How could the land belong to them or anyone? Therefore, how could they sell it? The following is a quote from the younger Chief Joseph, which demonstrates his feeling about the act of selling the land:

I believe the old treaty has never been correctly reported. If we ever owned the land we own it still for we never sold it. . . . [S]uppose a white man should come to me and say, "Joseph, I like your horses, and I want to buy them." I say to him, "No, my horses suit me, I will not sell them." Then he goes to my neighbor, and says to him, "Joseph has some good horses, I want to buy them but he refuses to sell." My neighbor answers, "Pay me the money, and I will sell you Joseph's horses." The white man returns to me and says, "Joseph, I have bought your horses and you must let me have them." If we sold our lands to the government, this is the way they were bought.¹⁷

Long before US Indian agents negotiated with the council of Nez Perce Chief's, including the Old Chief Joseph, and before the younger Chief Joseph and his council parlayed with Army officers, including General Oliver Otis Howard, the US Constitution of 1789 had empowered Congress to regulate commerce with foreign nations, the several original states, and with the Indian tribes. Federal policy regarded each tribe as a sovereign entity capable of signing binding treaties with the US Government. In the first forty years of the new republic, the US signed multiple treaties with Indian tribes, which usually followed a basic pattern where the signatory tribe withdrew to a prescribed reservation. In return, the Federal Government promised to provide supplies, food, and often an annuity. In 1830, Congress chose to disregard Indian treaty guarantees when it

passed the Indian Removal Act, a bill drafted by President Andrew Jackson. During that time, in the mid-to-late eighteenth hundreds, the government sent agents to buy sections of land from the chiefs of various tribes.¹⁸

Whether Chief Joseph, or any other Indian agreed with the US Government's land deals--once they were made--the wagon trails opened up and allowed settlers to move westward in large numbers. The first settlers followed the now famous routes known as the Oregon, Santa Fe, and Smokey Hill Trails. After the discovery of gold in the territories of Montana and Idaho, many settlers began seeking fortune and adventure along the Bozeman Trail, which placed tens of thousands of them in a position of conflict with Indians like the Nez Perce.

As the settlers moved into Indian Territory, they began encroaching on the tribal hunting grounds, building railroads that dissected the buffalo herds, building outposts for soldiers, and putting up fences for cattle. Soon, the Indians started to get the picture of what was to come as the settlers' numbers increased. At first, some of the tribal Indian chief's tried to negotiate peace by accepting US treaties that allowed access across their land in exchange for promises to keep their hunting grounds free of settlers' farms and cattle ranches and to keep the Indian's villages safe and culturally unchanged.

For some time, many of those first treaties kept peace with the Indians, mainly because much of their cherished land was seen as too rugged and undesirable for most whites to settle or farm, keeping true to the old adage, one man's junk is another man's treasure. That situation of relative calm remained intact until news of the discovery of gold and silver reached settlers who were anxious to strike a claim and try to make their fortune. Soon, the flood of settlers was overwhelming to the Indians, and the old treaties

were broken without any recourse or compensation from the US Government. With more settlers came more towns, wagons, hunters, trappers, and soldiers. Before long, the professional buffalo hunters, like Buffalo Bill Cody, almost exterminated the great buffalo--which was thought by the Indians to have mystic powers--having sustained so many of their tribes over the ages.

Afterward, many different bands of Indian chiefs began holding council among their villages to discuss going to war with the white man to stop him from destroying their hunting grounds and their land. Because of the broken treaties, broken promises, and mismanaged relations, many of the Indians lost faith in the government and chose to go on the warpath. After the chief's held council, some bands of Indians became hostile and killed white settlers. When news of the Indian attacks reached the press, the government came under extreme pressure to protect other settlers from attacks; pressure that became a mission to be fulfilled by the Army. That mission was problematic for the relatively small Army, as nearly 1,000 separate engagements were fought against hostile Indians over a span of a several decades in the 1800s, including the battles fought against the Nez Perce in 1877.¹⁹

Prior to the Indian Wars, the Federal Government's focus was obviously placed on fighting against the formidable Confederate Army as it struggled to preserve the Union. During the Civil War, the brunt of the mission to protect settlers from hostile Indians rested on the shoulders of untrained civilian volunteers or militia. During the period that the militia fought Indians, many poor decisions were made with unfortunate acts of retaliation committed by both whites and Indians. Those acts caused even more

animosity and hate to fester between both sides that saw themselves as protectors of their people and property.

After the Civil War, because of limitations placed on the Army (such as the government's drawdown) and southern Reconstruction, the government often continued to rely on a civilian force or militia to battle hostile Indians. Those battles were mostly low level and sporadic and only killed a few whites and Indians here and there--unlike the tragic battles later fought by General Custer and Captain Fetterman against the Sioux, but the most damaging result of having a civilian militia fight the Indians was the connection the Indian made with whites in general after those engagements.

Also, because many civilians used even less diplomacy than the government to take Indian land--while committing indiscriminate vigilante-style attacks against their villages, the Indians began to distrust and hate the white man even more.

The Indians' hatred created a more difficult climate for future official negotiations with the government's Indian agents and army officers: a problem that plagued Army officers, like Brigadier General Howard, when he attempted to negotiate with the Nez Perce chiefs in 1877.

Another problem that arose from civilian militias fighting with Indians was that the civilians did not have the training or equipment needed to conduct sustained offensive operations, which limited their actions to mere raids, rather than coordinated actions that could bring the Indians to peaceful parleys or long-term peace.²⁰

During the skirmishes with militia, Indians got a glimpse of the white man's personality, fighting techniques, and weapons--weapons that eventually fell into the hands of warrior's, and brought them up to par with settlers and soldiers by increasing

their firepower with the modern rifles. Of course, trading with the settlers for rifles and retrieving them from their victims after battles end were not the only ways Indians obtained modern weapons. Prior to the greatest Plains Indian wars, like the ones with the Sioux and Nez Perce, the US Government already had a policy of issuing rifles to Indians as a term of negotiation.

On behalf of the government, Indian agents used hunting rifles to coerce the chiefs into moving their villages onto the reservations. By providing the Indians with a means of feeding their families once their traditional hunting grounds were made off-limits, the government hoped to pacify them into remaining peacefully on the reservation.

Due to a lack of forethought and misunderstanding the cultural differences between the Indian bands, the government failed to realize that the Indians did not understand land boundaries in the same way as white men did. Also, to the Indian, the ceremony of hunting buffalo and to battle with his enemy was a key part of a warrior's life. Just because some tribes accepted treaties, did not mean that the other, stronger tribes would capitulate as easily. Therefore, arming Indians to entice them onto reservations did nothing but provide them with rifles that would later be used against the Army; affecting the US commander's success by diminishing his advantage of superior firepower.²¹

By the time the larger, more devastating, and headline-grabbing battles, like the Fetterman, Custer, Crook, Perry, Howard and Miles campaigns occurred, the nation's newspaper headlines were already primed to sensationalize the Army's losses causing even more political pressure due to the public's outcry for security on the western plains and for punishment of the Indians.

For the unfortunate US presidents who inherited the Indian problem during the years prior to and during the Nez Perce War, their strategies were different in some ways, yet the same in others. Each one, whether sympathetic toward Indians or not, felt a great deal of pressure and responsibility to clear the country of hostile Indian bands in order to keep the white settlers safe. Even President Abraham Lincoln, who actually served as a soldier in the Black Hawk War of 1832, saw firsthand the atrocities that occurred as a result of poor diplomacy between the US and Indians.²²

In 1865, Lincoln's predecessor, Andrew Johnson faced the daunting task of bringing the nation back together after four divisive years of Civil War. Complicating the function of his administration was the great debate about how severely the former Confederate states should be punished for leaving the Union. At the time President Johnson was trying to reunite former enemies, Congress was dominated by the so-called Radical Republicans, who vehemently opposed him over control of post Civil War Reconstruction in the South, a struggle that ultimately culminated in his impeachment, though Congress failed to remove him from office in the spring of 1868. Along with all of his political problems, Johnson had to deal with an increased frequency of Indian violence out West and with a smaller regular Army with which to oppose the hostilities.

Also of great importance for the battered nation that faced great postwar debt was the issue of funding the huge cost of maintaining the Army and its forts, as well as the expense of conducting military campaigns against hostile Indians. In 1877, war with the Nez Perce alone, would tally a heavy cost for the government. In 4 1/2 months of traveling and fighting from Idaho to Montana, the Army counted 123 dead soldiers, 55 dead civilians, and about as many wounded. The government estimated its cost of

fighting the war at \$931,329, not including destroyed property or stolen stock. The Nez Perce losses were incalculable. They had lost somewhere in the neighborhood of 155 of the 800 people who started on the journey. Another ninety were wounded, and hundreds more died in exile after their surrender. The proud Nez Perce people, who had thrived for so many years, left their homeland rich and powerful before they began their war on 17 June, and they found themselves poverty stricken and demoralized at trail's end on 5 October 1877, their homeland removed, their horses gone, and their freedom lost.²³

Also troubling for the Army was that many officers were often influenced by the hostile actions of civilian settlers or Western public opinion on how they should fight Indians. One extreme example of this is the events of the Battle of White Bird Canyon on 17 June 1877, which was actually started by a civilian named Arthur “Ad” Chapman. Chapman was a member of a group of about a dozen civilian volunteers attached to the 1st Cavalry, which was commanded by Captain David Perry. Before the battle commenced, Chapman told Perry that he could “whip the cowardly Injuns” himself.²⁴ Perry had the volunteers take cover behind some large rocks prior to a truce meeting between seventy members of the nontreaty Nez Perce and a delegation of the 1st US Cavalry. Mr. Chapman disobeyed the captain’s order to “hold fire” and shot a member of the Nez Perce truce party before discussions could even begin. This treachery precipitated a fierce battle.²⁵

After the Nez Perce representative was shot, the other sixty-nine Indian warriors reacted quickly to outflank and rout the 110 soldiers and civilian volunteers of the 1st Cavalry, killing 44 of their men, with no Nez Perce killed. Mr. Chapman’s fateful shot did more than just send thirty-four Cavalry soldiers and civilians to their grave. It

signified the beginning of the four-month war with the Nez Perce, which ended in many dead or wounded on both sides of the 1877 conflict. Though the civilian's rifle shot marked the beginning of actual hostilities, the stage was set for the end to peaceful relations between the US Government and the Nez Perce by earlier interactions between settlers and the Nez Perce.

A local white settler had murdered the father of a Nez Perce brave from Chief Joseph's tribe over a disputed missing horse. A few days later, the brave, along with several others of his tribe, took revenge and killed the settler along with several innocent men who happened to be with him at the time. In this context, General Oliver Otis Howard, his Indian agent, and members of the 7th Cavalry met with Chief Joseph and his council to discuss a new treaty that demanded the Nez Perce move from their land in the Wallowa Valley onto the government's Indian reservation.

Chief Joseph argued that the new treaty violated the promise that had been made between agents and his father many years ago. General Howard was sympathetic, but insisted that there was nothing that could be done about it. He informed the chief that, although they were friends, his men would move the tribe by force if necessary. This signaled the end of negotiations and led to the flight of the Nez Perce over rough terrain that stretched nearly 1,350 miles along a route from Oregon, through Idaho, Wyoming, and ending near the Bear Paw Mountains in northeastern Montana.

After the Nez Perce began their flight, the soldiers under General Howard's command took pursuit. For Howard's unit, the task would be very difficult, as the Nez Perce were extremely mobile and possessed a great herd of horses that enabled them to switch to fresh animals more often than the US Cavalryman. Once the Nez Perce entered

onto the Lolo Trail, it became even more difficult for Howard's men to continue their pursuit. The Lolo Trail crosses the Bitterroot Mountains and crosses the Clearwater and Bitterroot water systems. At one point, the Lolo Trail crosses a divide known as the Lolo Pass, which rises to over 700 feet, making it very difficult to traverse. For generations before the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Lolo Trail had been a familiar hunting trail for many Indians, including the Nez Perce. After suffering through crossing the trail, Lewis and Clark entered the following description in their journey, "This day we passed over immense [*sic*] hil[ls] and some of the worst roads that ever horses passed, our horses frequently fell."²⁶ Adding more difficulty to the long Nez Perce flight is that their trek was made in harsh weather conditions that took the worst toll on the Indian women, children, old people, and horses.²⁷ Illustrating the territory where the battles of the Nez Perce War were fought, the map at figure 1 depicts the great distance and rough terrain traversed by the Indians and the Army.

In addition to the maps, the following chronological list provides an overview of the major battles of the Nez Perce War: White Bird Battle, 17 June: This conflict was the first major battle of the Nez Perce War. The Nez Perce bands completely routed the 1st Cavalry Regiment commanded by Captain David Perry, and showed General Howard that the Indians were a force to be reckoned with during the battle.

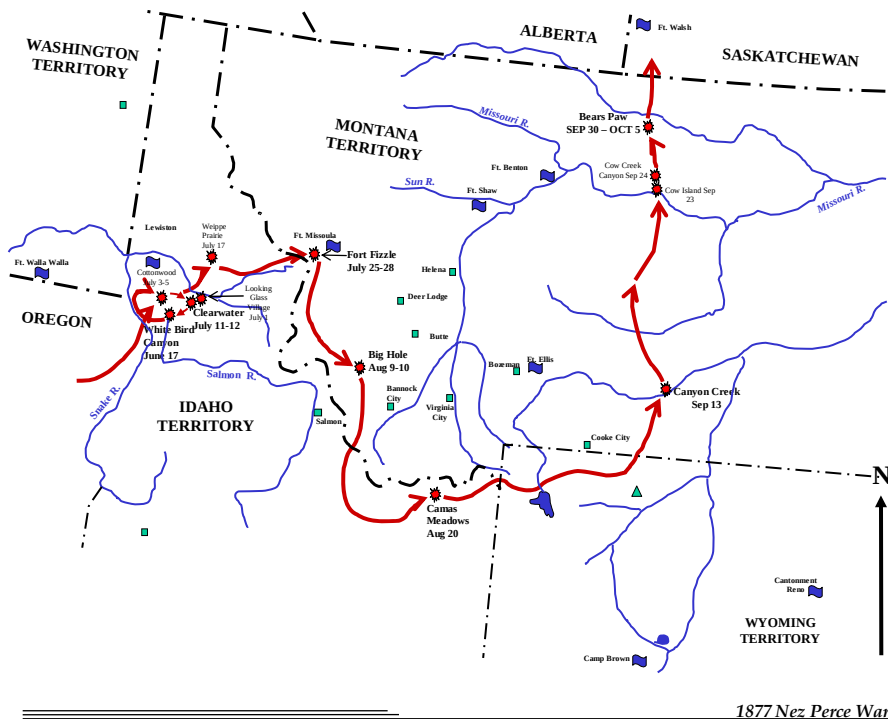


Figure 1. Map of the Nez Perce War

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

Clearwater Battle, 11-12 July: Though indecisive, the Nez Perce forces were strengthened at this battle because the great warrior Looking Glass and his band joined the fight. Looking Glass became the war chief for all the bands during the Nez Perce War.

Big Hole Battle, 9 August: Some ninety Nez Perce lives were lost in this battle, many of them women and children. Today, the Big Hole battlefield is a National Historical Site.

Camas Meadows Battle, 20 August: During this battle, the Nez Perce slowed General Howard's advance by stealing 150 of his mules.

Canyon Creek Battle, 13 September: Though Colonel Sturgis managed to catch up with the Nez Perce, his advance was repelled, causing him great personal frustration and embarrassment.

Bear Paw Battle, 3 September to 5 October: Both sides in this final battle sustained great losses. Weary of his people's suffering, Joseph negotiated an end to the fighting.

In the spring of 1877, a small group of Nez Perce warriors avenged the murders of two men from their village by conducting a raid on local white settlers. After the warrior's raid, an Army force comprised of Companies F and H, 1st US Cavalry, and about a dozen Idaho volunteers under Captain Perry's command traveled to White Bird Canyon to put down the newly hostile Nez Perce. In an act of truce, the Nez Perce chiefs sent out a party to signal a parley. The first indicator that the Army would have problems fighting the Nez Perce warriors was demonstrated by Captain Perry's poor showing at the negotiation--turned Battle of White Bird Canyon. Illustrated at figure 2, the Battle of White Bird Canyon highlights Captain Perry's failure in three critical areas of Army leadership: discipline, command and control, and tactical proficiency. Failure to execute in these three areas doomed Perry's unit to an embarrassing defeat by the Nez Perce warriors.

Showing poor discipline, Arthur "Ad" Chapman ignored Perry's earlier order not to fire on the Indians when he took an ill-advised rifle shot at the Nez Perce truce party at the White Bird Canyon.²⁸ Immediately after Chapman fired his rifle, the battle began which led to a complete rout of Perry's unit by the poorly armed Nez Perce warriors.

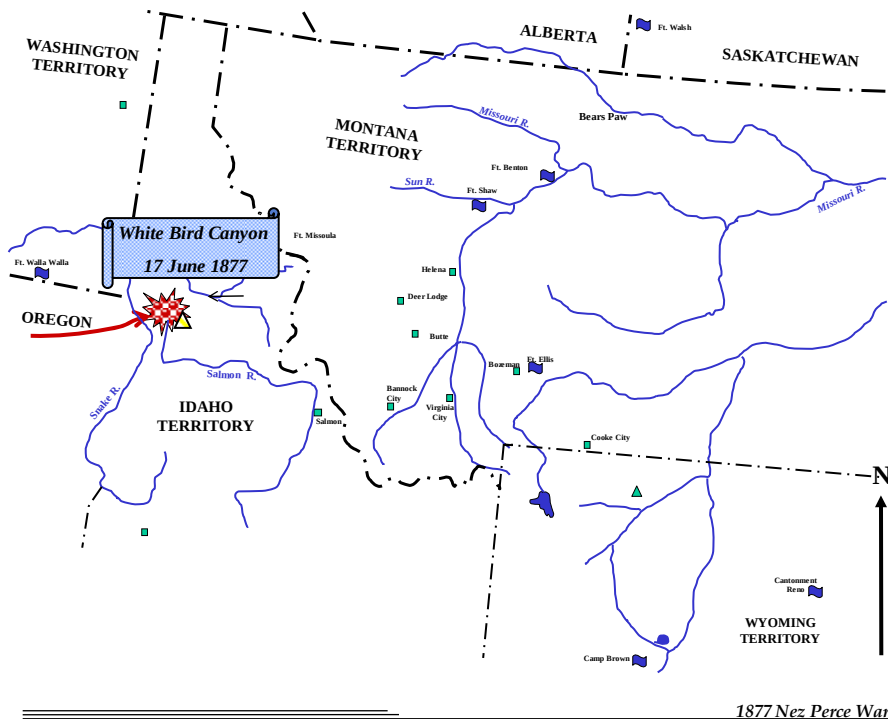


Figure 2. Whitebird Canyon Battle

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

Demonstrating the ramifications of poor discipline before and during battle, Chapman's rifle shot ended the hopes that a peaceful parley might occur in lieu of war. After the ill-advised shot from Chapman, fifteen Nez Perce warriors led by Two Moons quickly charged the volunteers and scattered the numerically superior US force down a rocky knoll. Attesting to weak command and control, Captain Perry soon lost control of his men as they scattered and were flanked by Ollicot and his braves. After emerging from their position of concealment behind a western butte, one of Ollicot's party shot F Company's trumpeter, costing Perry his means of control and compounding the unit's confusion.²⁹

Perry's force discarded good tactics as the right and left flanks dissolved, leaving Company F to break and run from the middle. With men running toward their horses in the rear, the entire organization gave way to chaos and turned into a melee of mass confusion in about five minutes.³⁰

Learning of the heavy casualties taken during the embarrassing defeat, General Howard soon summoned hundreds of soldiers to form a unit he would deploy in an effort to defeat the nontreaty band. Howard's belated realization that the Nez Perce were much more dangerous than he had expected played out over the next four months as the Indians outmaneuvered or outright beat the Army at nearly every encounter.

The Nez Perce War caused great anxiety for the Army, as well as the settlers and voters that came in contact with the Nez Perce along the trail in 1877. Politicians, Army commanders, local civilians, and the press followed the Nez Perce saga with great excitement, fear, and irritation. When the Army failed to make progress during the war, the nation's newspapers chastised them, leading General Sherman to pressure Howard to bring the crisis to a quick end.

Describing the events of that battle, Robert Utley wrote:

White Bird Canyon shook the Army badly. The Nez Perce had demonstrated a leadership, discipline, and tactical skill that, added to the fighting qualities of the individual warriors, routed a superior force of regular soldiers. Howard's commendation of Captain Perry and attempt to rationalize the disaster eased the humiliation no more than it concealed the military deficiencies that had contributed to the defeat--overconfidence, weak leadership, and poor marksmanship, horsemanship, and discipline.³¹

During the course of the war Nez Perce old men, women, and children followed their Chiefs and warriors in a desperate flight for survival. For the Nez Perce, this was not only a war for survival, but also for the preservation of a way of life.

Following the battle at White Bird Canyon, the Nez Perce fought through a few minor skirmishes as they moved north enroute to the Clearwater River. There, the Nez Perce linked up with Chief Looking Glass and his accomplices before making camp. While the Indian's made camp, a group of volunteers under the command of Ed McConville became disgusted with the slowness of the Army to catch up with them and formed their own reconnaissance team to locate the band. After locating the Nez Perce, and while sitting around in camp, one of the volunteer's accidentally fired his rifle, alerting the Nez Perce warriors to the volunteer's location. Afterward, around one hundred warriors began harassing the volunteers from a nearby bluff above the river. After being harassed all day, the volunteers had a brief respite until shortly after midnight, then the Indians attacked them about one o'clock in the morning with a strong intermittent fire which lasted until daylight. During the attack, the Indians succeeded in stampeding the volunteer's horses, but killed none of the men. About seven o'clock the following morning the Indians came up in strong force and formed a line to attack, but after holding council, decided not to try it, and took up their march toward the Clearwater.

Afterward, McConville sent a dispatch to General Howard informing him of the Nez Perce attack, the loss of his men's horses, and the location of the Indian's camp, but Howard was unable to locate the site right away due to poor tracking by his guide Ad Chapman. After spending awhile lost in search of the Nez Perce, Howard's unit had to double back over two miles because he had passed the camp.

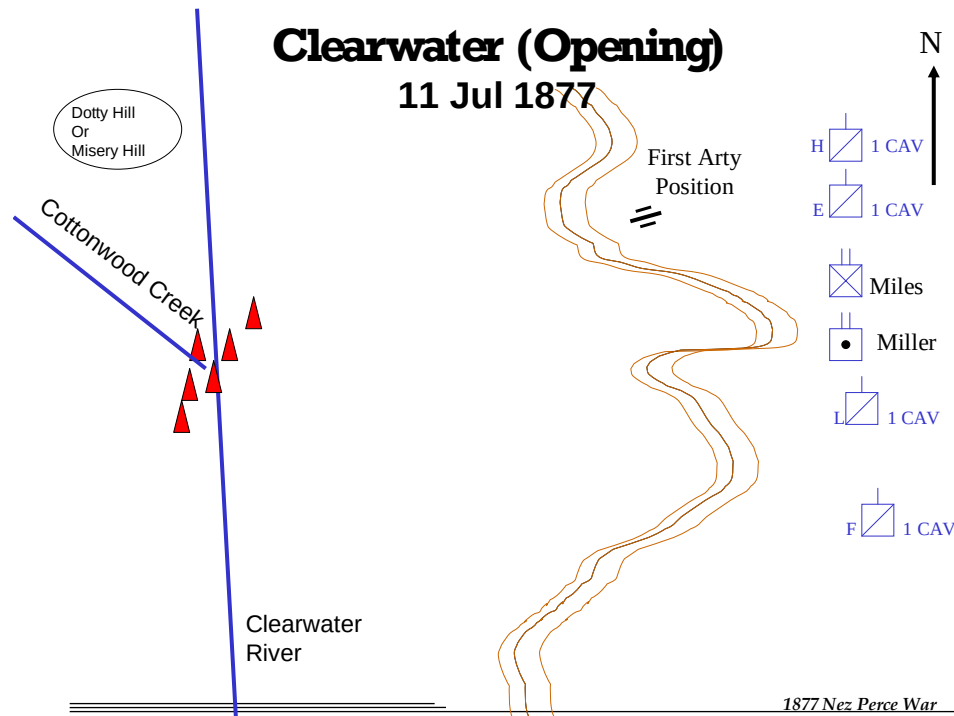


Figure 3. Clearwater Engagement Map³²

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

After he finally located the Nez Perce, Howard's unit attempted to descend the mountain near the Clearwater River to surprise the warriors, but the Indian's superior mobility foiled the General's attempt. At that point, Howard realized that he was forced to conduct the battle from the high plateau across the river. He then ordered a salvo of artillery and Gatling Gun fire against the village, but the distance was too great and the layout of the terrain too much in favor of the Nez Perce for the guns to inflict much damage on them, with only one Nez Perce sharpshooter reported killed.

Conversely, the Nez Perce rifles had quite an impact on the soldiers. A Sergeant Schorr, who was at the Clearwater Battle, later wrote of the Nez Perce sharpshooter who

was killed by the artillery: “Of the Indians killed we never found out, but this much I do know, that the Indian sharpshooter, who was afterwards brought down, every time his rifle barked one of the troops fell.”³³

As far as the soldiers’ small arms effect on warriors, a statement by Colonel Bailey further illustrates how the lack of marksmanship training impacted the Army’s ability to fight. Bailey wrote, “At this era of our army we had had almost no target practice, and we were like the Indians themselves, with whom poverty and their way of hunting made it a custom to shoot only at short distances.”³⁴

After a two-day battle marked by poor Army marksmanship compared to successful sniper attacks by the warriors and by poor Army command and control, the Nez Perce finally managed a nearly impossible escape before continuing on toward Montana Territory.

The Clearwater battle is another great illustration to highlight the army’s failures during the war, and is an example of the Indians moving in a manner that surprised the soldiers.³⁵ During the battle, a group of Nez Perce warriors managed to ambush an Army supply train, and after two days of fighting, neither side was able to claim victory even though the Nez Perce matched less than 100 lightly armed warriors against the Army’s 400 cavalry, infantry, and artillerymen. Because of their embarrassing failures, the volunteers referred to the engagement site as Camp Misery.³⁶

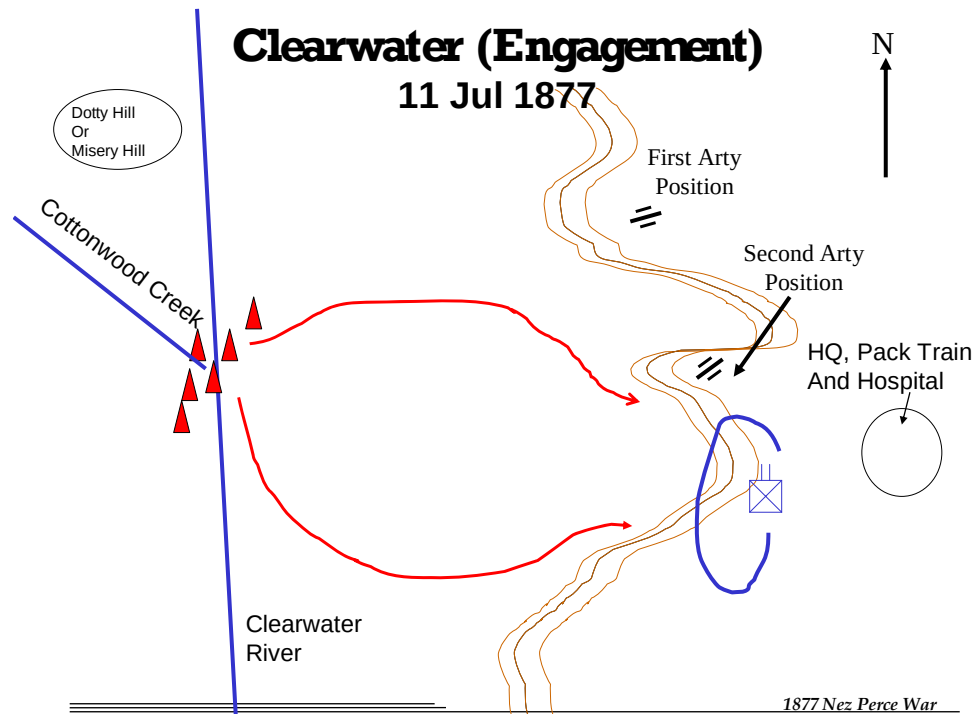


Figure 4. Clearwater Engagement Map Defense

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

In defense of their camp during the Clearwater Battle, the Nez Perce warriors displayed techniques familiar to the Army, by building rifle pits with boulders and digging shallow trenches to use as firing lines. During the course of the battle the Indians improved their fighting positions and strengthened the fortifications, and they even used pine trees for cover and concealment and climbed some of the trees to gain superior visibility for sniper positions.³⁷

Chief Joseph has been credited as being the “Red Napoleon” of Indian warfare; however, historical accounts suggests that he did not play a major role in the direction of the Nez Perce war. Though he was not the sole leader, he did make some good decisions

that allowed his warriors to take good defensive positions during the Clearwater Battle, while protecting the village from being overwhelmed by the Army.

The Indian chiefs did not direct every move by warriors, and the warriors traditionally fought independently, moving and fighting on their own initiative. However, evidence shows that the Nez Perce chiefs did directly contribute to the success of the band during the several battles of the Nez Perce war--especially during the Clearwater Battle--by yelling out commands and shouts of encouragement while simultaneously organizing separate and coordinated charges toward the troops. The interaction of the chiefs in that manner greatly influenced the Indian's ability to hold the Army back while allowing the noncombatant's time to pack up and move the village.

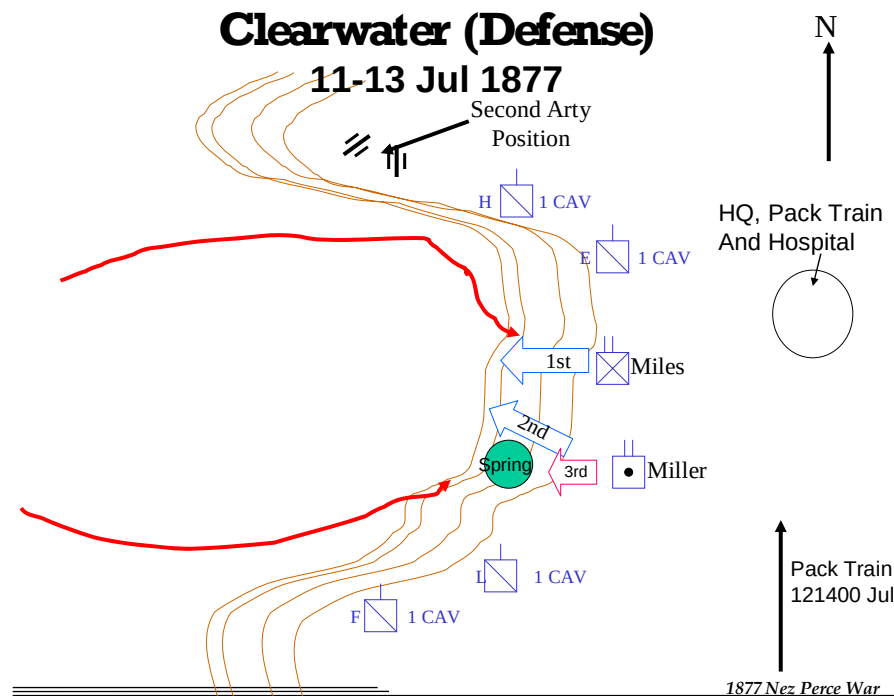


Figure 5. Clearwater Battle

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

After the Clearwater Battle, the Nez Perce continued on a northeasterly route along the Lolo Trail before encountering the Army's failed blockade attempt known to the local citizens of Lolo, Montana, and the Nez Perce as "Fort Fizzle" due to its failure to stop the Nez Perce.³⁸ The events of Fort Fizzle illustrate yet another situation where the Nez Perce made the Army and civilian volunteers look amateurish and blundering. Captain Rawn had been tasked with stopping the Nez Perce, but had insufficient forces to fulfill his orders from the Army, which was still embarrassed by the Little Big Horn disaster of 1876 and now stung by Nez Perce victories in Idaho. Three parleys between Nez Perce chiefs, US soldiers, and Lolo citizens were held over the next three days.³⁹ Neither side found the other's terms acceptable. The military demanded the surrender of arms, ammunition, and horses; but the Nez Perce refused, saying they needed them for their eastward trek and promising they would pass peacefully. They were going to meet again on the fourth day, but by then the Nez Perce found they could end the stalemate. Nez Perce scouts had found a way to pass around the soldiers without further confrontation. Many of the Lolo citizen volunteers accepted the Nez Perce promise to abstain from hostilities, but sharing the fears of possible retaliation on families and property, they abandoned the fort and trickled home. On the morning of 28 July, the Nez Perce bypassed the breastworks by climbing up a nearby low bridge and traveling just out of sight of the interception party. After descending from the mountains to the east, the Indians passed peacefully through three separate ranks of volunteers and soldiers, some in route to and others leaving Fort Fizzle. The Nez Perce then turned south and, thinking the war was over and Howard was no longer in pursuit, they began a leisurely trek along the west bank of the Bitterroot River. The fort had fizzled. But it was a successful failure

and the battle few participants wanted was avoided. The Nez Perce proceeded south through the Bitterroot Valley, confident that they had made a pact for nonaggression.⁴⁰

On 13 September, the fleeing Nez Perce realized that Sturgis and General Howard were on their trail and decided to circle back through the Hart Mountains and outwitted Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis. Having just arrived from the Tongue River towing sixty-eight wagons heavily loaded with supplies, Sturgis' 7th Cavalry got their chance to try and defeat or capture the Nez Perce.⁴¹ Assured that he would cut the Nez Perce off, Sturgis converged with the Indians trail and Howard's troops near Dead Indian Pass. He then scrambled down into Clarks Fork Canyon on the route he had been told did not exist, where he caught up with Howard a few miles below the mouth of the canyon. The war against the Nez Perce could have ended at this point.

After months of chasing the Nez Perce from behind, General Howard finally got some help from Sturgis' troops from the east. Sturgis assured Howard that his 7th Cavalry would close in with Howard's unit and capture the Nez Perce on the east side of the Absaroka Mountains. Howard wrote a message that expressed his confidence, "[It] seems hardly possible that they can escape this time."⁴² Demonstrating their ingenuity and determination again, the Indians managed to escape and heap more embarrassment and frustration on General Howard, Colonel Sturgis, and the Army.

Sturgis' decision to camp and wait for the Nez Perce to pass through his trap was yet another example of the Army leadership underestimating the Nez Perce abilities. As the Nez Perce left Yellowstone and crossed over the Absaroka Mountains, Sturgis and his six companies camped between the mouth of Clarks Fork Canyon and Heart Mountain where they had a perfect view of the ridges and foothills. Spoiling for a fight, Sturgis and

his company camped in an ideal spot to intercept the Nez Perce as they emerged from the Absarokas. Sturgis wanted not only to capture the Nez Perce, but also to exact a measure of revenge against Indians for the annihilation of Custer's Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn one year earlier on 25 June 1876 where he had lost a son.

Excited at the prospect of the Nez Perce capture, Howard sent scouts to give Sturgis an urgent message to stay put as the tribe moved over the mountains. But the Nez Perce killed the scouts before they could make it to Sturgis. Then, on 7 September, as the Nez Perce came down the upper Clarks Fork, Yellow Wolf and several warriors came upon two of Sturgis' scouts southwest of Heart Mountain. One scout was killed and another escaped wounded. Yellow Wolf moved quickly back to the Nez Perce camp the next day to warn that troops were up ahead. Later that day, other scouts reported to Sturgis that it appeared the Nez Perce were headed toward the Shoshone River. Sturgis, though, became impatient and restless, and made a fateful decision. Rather than wait near Heart Mountain, he ordered his troops to pack up and move toward the Shoshone River. The Nez Perce did indeed move south toward the Shoshone River, but not very far. Instead, they found an open spot and cleverly concealed their trail. They milled their horses around in every direction, creating confusing tracks that seemed to show the Nez Perce scattering. Then, instead of traveling in the direction they were previously heading out of the basin and across an open plain, the Nez Perce turned to the north, traveling along a steep, timbered mountainside for several miles.

They then took a steep drainage to the mouth of Clarks Fork Canyon, not far from where Sturgis' troops had camped the day before. The trek through the narrow canyon was no doubt difficult, especially with 700 people and their possessions. Howard later

marveled at the band's passage through what he called a strange canyon, where rocks on each side came so near together that two horses abreast could hardly pass.

Farther south, a cavalry scout eventually discovered the Nez Perce trail where the horses had milled. When Howard arrived at the pass, his men waved their flags furiously toward Heart Mountain, hoping to signal the Sturgis troops that the Nez Perce were on their way. The desperate signals, though, were in vain. Sturgis was not there, and the Nez Perce were well on their way toward the open plains.

After evading capture in yet another trap, the band moved southward through the Bitterroot Mountain Range then down to the Big Hole River, where they made camp. Then, on the afternoon of 8 August, an advance party led by Colonel John Gibbons from Fort Shaw, Montana, discovered the Nez Perce camp beside the Big Hole River. Early on the morning of 9 August, Gibbon's unit composed of Regular Army and an attachment of civilian volunteers initiated a surprise attack on the sleeping Indians (figure 6).

Soon after the attack, the stunned Nez Perce warriors rallied to their fighting positions, where, once again they proved their deadly effectiveness as snipers and forced Gibbon's troops to withdraw to cover. The quick response of the Nez Perce warriors prevented the village from being captured and allowed the noncombatants of the band time to pack up and flee the area. After the Nez Perce gathered their wounded and as many of their goods as they could, they quickly moved out to the Big Hole Valley taking a more deliberate southward trek (figure 7).

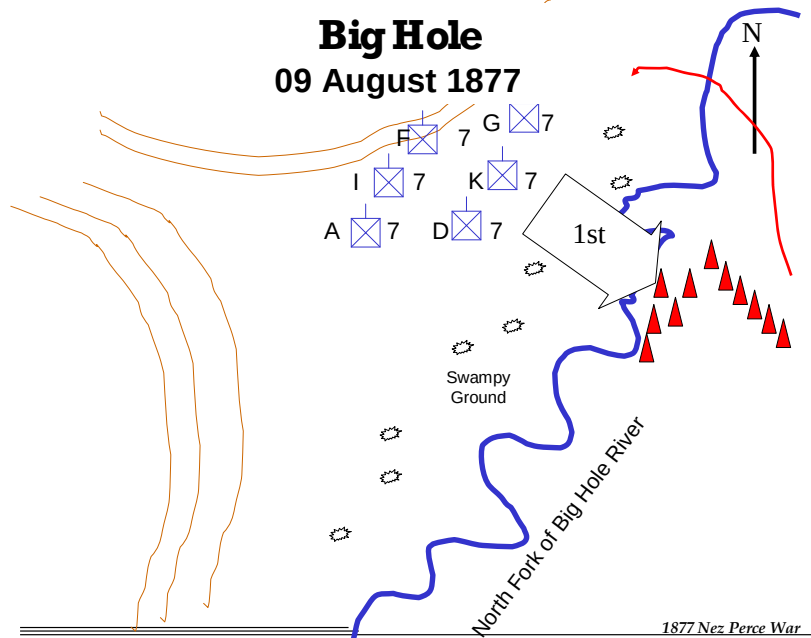


Figure 6. Big Hole Battle

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

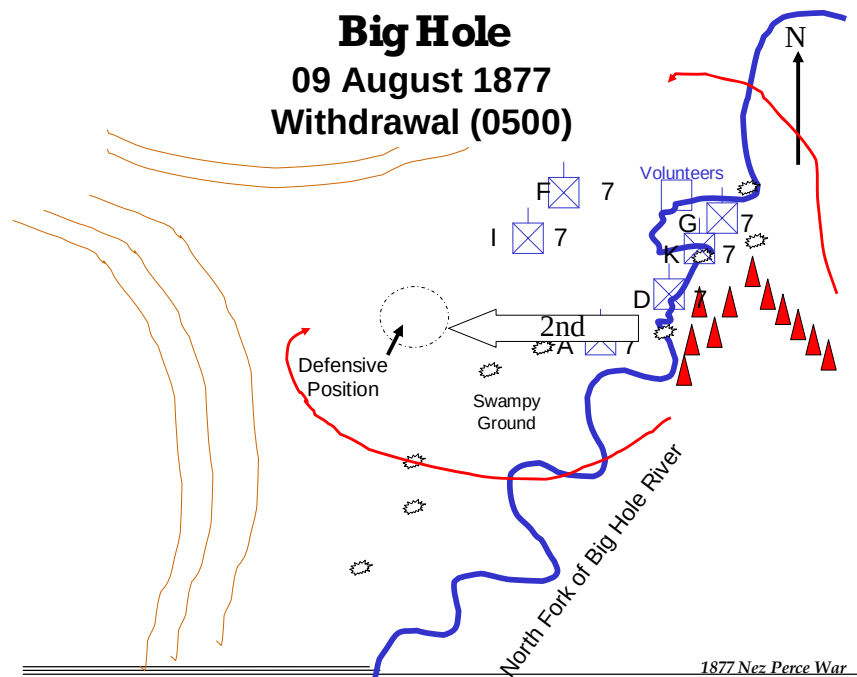


Figure 7. Big Hole Battle (Withdrawal)

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

The Indians' superior mobility increased the emphasis of attacking their villages. To force the Indian warriors into a fight, the Army felt it had to strike the village. Thus, total war was used to gain the best chance of moving through enemy territory, avoiding detection and finding and attacking the enemy village before the Indians were able to escape.⁴³

On 30 September Army troops under Colonel Miles' command surprised the Nez Perce at their camp on the Snake River near the Bear Paw Mountains. Figure 8 shows where the Nez Perce chiefs had camped to rest their exhausted people and horses the night before the attack. Because they thought they had finally eluded General Howard, they stopped and placed themselves just short of making a complete escape forty miles from the Canadian border. After the attack by Miles' unit, the tired warriors--rallied by their chiefs--put up a valiant five-day fight that was interrupted by brief attempts to negotiate an end to the war.

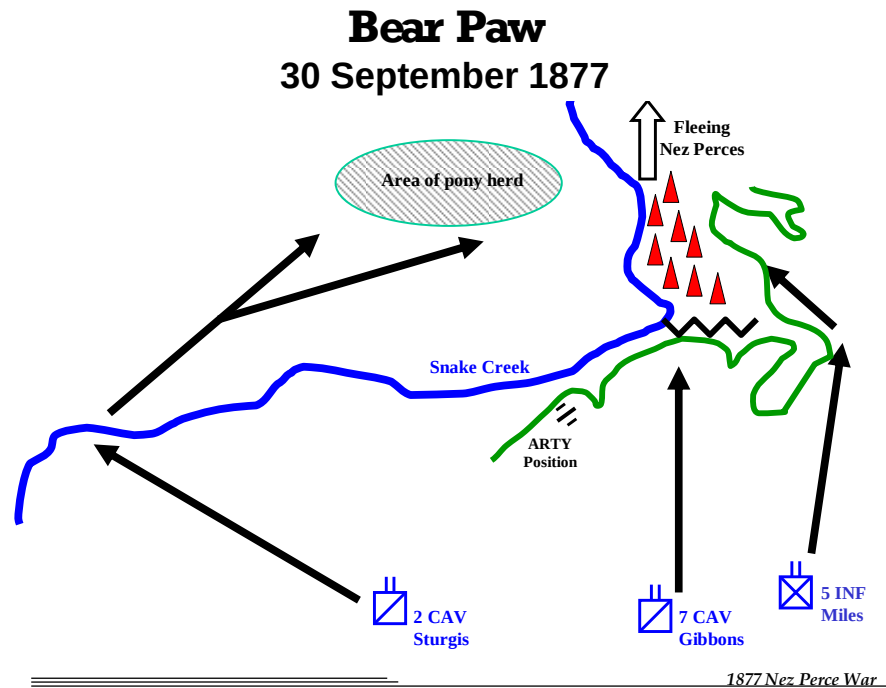


Figure 8. Bear Paw Battle

Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004; and Jerome A. Greene, *Nez Perce Summer*, Topographical Sketch 'Bear's Paw Mountains,' Grillon, "Battle of Snake Creek," Shows Seventh Cavalry located in the rear of the artillery position on the south bluff., 123.

Then, with only eighty-nine warriors left well enough to fight and with his people freezing, hungry and wounded, Chief Joseph emerged and approached General Miles and Howard to request a cease-fire. It was at that place and time that Joseph held his rifle up to the Generals and made his historic speech of surrender. Figure 9 shows the great distance traveled by the Nez Perce and various Army units from the first battle at Clearwater in June, until the surrender at the Bear Paw Mountain Battle. It also illustrates just how close the Nez Perce came to making their escape to Sitting Bulls camp across the Canadian border.

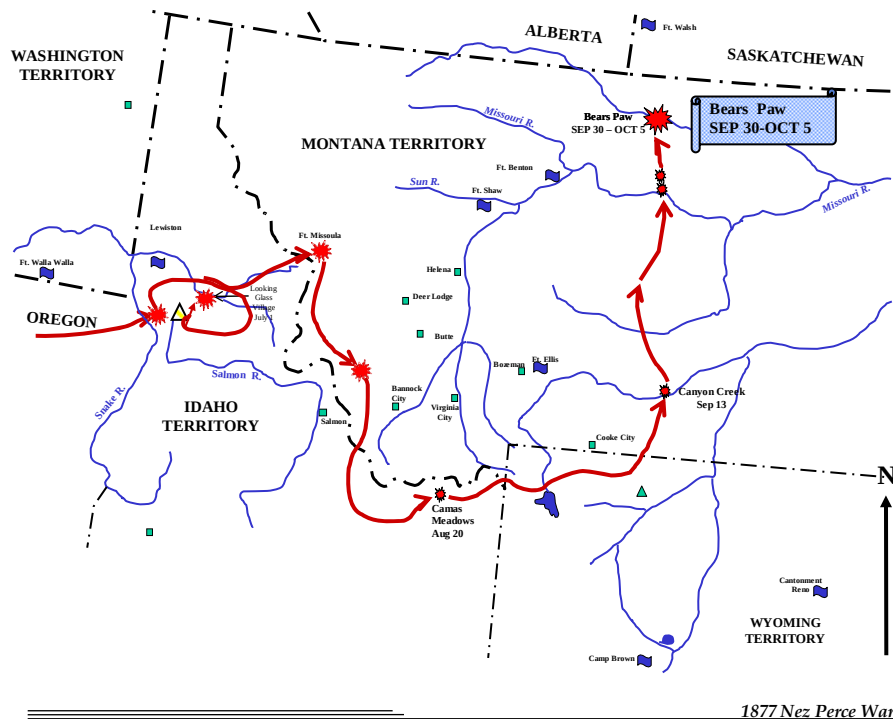


Figure 9. Bear's Paw Battle Overview

Source: Map taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004; and Jerome A. Greene, *Nez Perce Summer*, Topographical Sketch 'Bear's Paw Mountains," Grillon, "Battle of Snake Creek," Shows Seventh Cavalry located in the rear of the artillery position on the south bluff., 123.

The Nez Perce were unaware that Colonel Nelson A. Miles had been ordered from the Tongue River Cantonment near Miles City, Montana, to intercept the fugitives. Mile's 400 soldiers of the 2nd and 7th Cavalries, the 5th Mounted Infantry, and 40 Indian scouts crossed the Missouri River by steamer on 25 September. This was two days and seventy miles east of the Nez Perce crossing at Cow Island. Approaching from the southeast on 29 September, Miles ordered his forces to make camp. Miles was unaware of the Nez Perce camp's location just twelve miles away northwest.

Before sunrise on 30 September, army scouts alerted Colonel Miles of the Nez Perce camp. Miles ordered his troops to march, expecting to surprise and overwhelm the

Nez Perce with a sudden attack. In the Nez Perce camp, people awoke to cold and cloudy weather. Soon, a cavalry charge came from the southeast. Despite the surprise, the Nez Perce inflicted heavy casualties on the frontal attack made by Company K of the 7th Cavalry. The 2nd Cavalry made a flanking movement to the west, successfully separating the Nez Perce from their horses. With the 7th Cavalry reinforced by the 5th Infantry, the Nez Perce were forced to the north end of their camp. The army secured the bluff to the south. The Nez Perce held their position and prevented any further advance. Both sides suffered heavy casualties the first day. The Army lost twenty-three soldiers and had forty-five wounded. The Nez Perce lost twenty-seven men and women with another forty-six wounded. Later three additional Nez Perce noncombatants were killed when canon fire hit their shelter area. During the first day of action about 150 Nez Perce were able to flee north to Canada. Many reached the camp of Sitting Bull with word of the events at Bear Paw. A few were given refuge by the Sioux, but some were killed or captured by other enemy Indian tribes and turned over to the Army.

Unable to defeat the Nez Perce, the troops encircled and laid siege to the camp. On 4 October, General Howard arrived with a small escort and the possibility of reinforcements. With concern for the welfare of the women and children and with the promises of Miles and Howard, Joseph agreed to quit the fight. On the afternoon of 5 October, Chief Joseph, representing many of the remaining Nez Perce, ended the Battle of Bear Paw and the Nez Perce War by handing his rifle to Colonel Miles.⁴⁴

After the conclusion of the war, Commanding General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman described the Indian's fighting ability saying, "The Nez Perce fought

with almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines and field fortifications.”⁴⁵

Ironically, the Nez Perce had not been labeled as hostile when the US went to war with them in 1877. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the Nez Perce Indians analyzing the nature of their people and focusing on their ethnic background, hierarchy of leadership, cultural beliefs, standards of conduct, and fears. All of this information is provided to explain how the Nez Perce went from being friendly to whites to a tribe at war with the US.

¹Bruce Hampton, *Children of Grace: The Nez Perce War of 1877* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994), 307

²L. V. McWhorter, *Hear Me My Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1952), 8.

³Merrill Beal, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), 3.

⁴McWhorter, 156.

⁵Headquarters, Department of Army, Field Manual 100-7, *Decisive Force: The Army in Theater Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of Army, 31 May 1995), Chapter 1.

⁶William T. Sherman, *Report of the General of the Army, Headquarters of the Army*, Annual Report of the Secretary of War on the Operations of the Department for the Fiscal Year Ending June, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 7 November 1877), 1-15.

⁷Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 11.

⁸Francis Haines, *The Nez Perces: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 51.

⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰General O. O. Howard, *Nez Perce Joseph: An Account of his Ancestors, His Lands, His Confederates, His Enemies, His Murders, His War, His Pursuit, and Capture* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1908), 102.

¹¹Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 190.

¹²*Ibid.*, 190.

¹³*Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴Beal, 3.

¹⁵James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion," in *14th Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, 1896), 695.

¹⁶Alvin Josephy, Jr., "The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest," (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 24-25.

¹⁷Haines, 197.

¹⁸Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), 163.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 267.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 278-79.

²¹Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 8th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595-597.

²²Jerry Keenan, *Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars, 1492-1890* (Santa Barbara, CA: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication, 1997), 10.

²³McWhorter, 501.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 263.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 307.

²⁶Beal, 86.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 307.

²⁸Haines, 225.

²⁹McWhorter, 56.

- ³⁰Haines, 228.
- ³¹Utley, 301.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³McWhorter, 306.
- ³⁴Ibid., 307.
- ³⁵Ibid., 319-320.
- ³⁶Beal, 73.
- ³⁷McWhorter, 313-315.
- ³⁸Beal, 90-93.
- ³⁹Ibid., 94.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., 91-94.
- ⁴¹Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians! In the United States Cavalry, Custer's Favorite Regiment* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1972), 122.
- ⁴²Hampton, 190.
- ⁴³Ibid., 312-13.
- ⁴⁴Utley, 314.
- ⁴⁵Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 177.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEZ PERCE INDIANS

I have known the Nez Perce tribe since 1843. They were under my charge as Superintendent of Indian Affairs from June 1857 until 1859. They are the finest specimens of the aboriginal race upon this continent and have been friendly to the whites from the time of Lewis and Clark.¹

J. W. Nesmith, Oregon Senator

Anthropologists and archaeologists argue about the exact origins and age of the American Indian. Thus, it is not surprising that the exact beginnings of the Nez Perce are not known for certain.² Stories passed down by their ancestors indicate that the first Nez Perce tribesmen entered the Clearwater area (present-day Idaho) centuries ago; so long ago that the exact date is lost.³ However, there are many good sources available that were written by men who actually lived among the Nez Perce tribes in the era of written history. Those sources provide valuable insight that assists in understanding the Nez Perce as a complex race of people who had a very developed social hierarchy and rich individual personalities.

When analyzing the events that led to the end of peace between the Nez Perce Indians and the US Government, it is important to understand the nature of the Nez Perce; their leadership, background, beliefs, ethics, and fears. This chapter will provide a brief history of the Nez Perce (both treaty and nontreaty bands) and will explain how both bands gained their reputation throughout America as honest, brave, intelligent, and noble people whose warriors were among the most skilled, respected, and feared of all Indians.⁴ Giving his views of the Nez Perce, Colonel Nelson Applegate Miles wrote:

The Nez Perce are among the boldest men and best marksmen of any Indians I have encountered, and Chief Joseph is a man of more sagacity and intelligence than any Indian I have ever met; he counseled against the war, and against the usual cruelties practiced by the Indians, and is far more humane than such Indians as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull.⁵

Perhaps the best source for in-depth information about the Nez Perce is *Hear Me My Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend*, collected by historian L.V. McWhorter.

McWhorter spent a great deal of time during the early 1950s studying and living with the Nez Perce people in an attempt to understand their culture. He examined the common fears, stereotypes, and misunderstandings that ultimately led to violence and bloodshed between the Nez Perce and white settlers. He felt that both the US and Nez Perce could have avoided violence if their leaders would have been able to communicate better to resolve their differences and to trust each other in their negotiations over land treaties. While explaining the origin of the Nez Perce people in his book, Mr. McWhorter quoted a blind old Nez Perce warrior-tribal historian named Wottolen (hair combed over his eyes) when he wrote:

There are two places up Salmon River. Only two spots where the people lived. None were here on the Clearwater; none on the Lapwai or Snake rivers; Kakayohneme Creek is one place. The other is about fifteen miles above the mouth of Little Salmon River. It is called Tannish [Cut-Out Trail]. . . . The first generations of Nez Perce grew up at those two places I have named. I do not know how many snows back of that time.⁶

What is known with a good degree of certainty is that the Nez Perce were respected not only by white explorers and military men, but also neighboring Indians (both friend and foe). The reasons for such a high degree of respect are many. Having spent a great deal of time with the Nez Perce, McWhorter described them as “tall and stately, intelligent and pleasing in address, brave, though inclined to peace . . . as warriors they had no equal.”⁷

For the Nez Perce, there was no division of family, only different bands that were scattered over various geographic locations. The Nez Perce seemed to place emphasis on the deeds and acts of a man as a gauge for establishing who should be the leaders among their people. Though many whites seemed to have respected the Indian chiefs and their people for their sense of honor and bravery, one of the reasons white people mistrusted and misunderstood Indians is because of their Native American religious culture. Though many Nez Perce, including the elder Chief Joseph converted to Christianity, many others remained non-Christian, and even some of the Christian converts later rebuked their conversion after seeing the way the white man (who represented the God of Christianity) treated them so unfairly through deceitful land deals and through attacks on villages that killed defenseless elderly and women and children. These Nez Perce sought spiritual relief from the pressures brought by the settlers encroaching on their native soil and from losing so many of their people in the fight to keep their land and way of life. For the many Indians who refused Christianity, spiritual relief was found in a movement known as the Dreamer religion. The Dreamer theology was begun by a chief of the Wanapum tribe of North American Indians who was given the name Smohalla after he survived a tribal fight that left him for dead. Smohalla, which translates to “preacher,” founded the religious sect that became known as “Dreamers.”⁸ After he recovered from his wounds, he traveled through much of the West and to his old home on the upper Columbia and to Washington. There he announced that he had been in the spirit world and had returned with a new revelation that consisted of a return to primitive Indian customs and to a priesthood and ritual based on the Roman Catholic style of religion. The movement, that affected many Native Americans, included the use of interpreting dreams and visions to

foresee the future. Seeing that the white man was wiping out their homeland and way of life, many of the Nez Perce were inspired to accept the Dreamer religion.⁹ The Dreamers based their spiritualism on a hopeful native theology advocating a return to more traditional tribal beliefs. Dreamers practiced ritual dances accompanied by rhythmic drumming; for that reason the term “Drummers” was often applied to them.¹⁰ Strongly adhering to conventional Nez Perce precepts about the land, the Dreamers advocated rejection of the white man’s ways and a return to fundamental tribal values.

Smohalla had frequent trances. News of his experiences influenced many of the Indian tribes of eastern Washington, Oregon, and western Idaho. Besides Sunday services the Dreamers held a service for the commemoration of the dead in early spring and offered thanksgiving for salmon and for berries in April and October, respectively. The Dreamer sect caused some trouble for government officials in 1870 by refusing to come under reservation restrictions. A Dreamer church was established at Priests Rapids on the upper Columbia and one at Union Gap on the Yakima reservation.¹¹ Even some white men thought the Nez Perce could communicate among themselves through dreams.

According to author L.V. McWhorter, “The earliest mention in official documents of the religious culture . . . is by A. B. Meacham, superintendent of Indian affairs in Oregon.” In his September 1870 report, Mr. Meacham wrote: “One serious drawback [to the adoption of white civilization] is the existence among the Indians of Oregon of a peculiar religion called Smokeller or Dreamers, the chief doctrine of which is that the red man is again to rule the country, and this sometimes leads to rebellion against lawful authority.”¹² For these reasons, Army leaders with strong religious convictions, like General Oliver Otis Howard, who made his Christian faith a key part of his daily life,

even so far as to require soldiers under his command to attend worship activities, were negatively influenced by the ideals of Indians as pagans or heathens who could only be dealt with by overwhelming force. General Howard later wrote publications, which stated his opinion that the Dreamer Religion was a factor that led to the Nez Perce War in 1877.

Howard wrote:

This fanaticism is kept alive by the superstition of these “dreamers,” who industriously teach, that if they continue steadfast in their present belief, a leader will be raised up in the east. . . . [I]nfluenced by such a belief, Joseph and his band firmly declined to enter into any negotiations, or make any arrangements, that looked to a final settlement of the questions pending between himself and the Government.¹³

Though most white men seemed to view Indians as “heathens,” the Nez Perce proved them to be capable of compassion, respect, and decency during the war. They allowed many captive white people to go free and abstained from the traditional Indian act of scalping and mutilating their fallen enemy.¹⁴

Prior to entering into war with the US Government, the Nez Perce tribe was one of the most powerful in the Pacific Northwest.¹⁵ They are from a branch of the Shahaptian linguistic family, and their language is part of the Penutian language. French traders gave the Nez Perce name to them, supposedly because the Frenchmen encountered some of the Indians adorning pendants in their noses; although it is believed that the custom was not widespread among the tribe.¹⁶ The entire Nez Perce tribe is believed to have numbered over 6,000 people in 1805, but their population was less than 3,000 around the time of the Nez Perce War, mainly due to disease.

The Nez Perce were neighbors and friends to the several tribes with whom they shared linguistic kinship, though none of the friendly tribes located on their North, West, or South boundaries, such as the Umatillas, Kalispels, Spokans, Walla Wallas, Cayuses,

Yakimas, and Coeur d'Alenes, played a part in assisting the Nez Perce in their fight with the US Government. Several of their tribal enemies hindered their flight, however, either independently or as part of the pursuing US Army.

Their hated enemies were the Kutenais, Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, Assiniboines, Lakotas, and Bannocks. Working for General Howard as scouts in pursuit of the Nez Perce, the Bannocks showed no mercy for any Nez Perce with whom they came in contact: shooting, scalping, and mutilating many Nez Perce found displaced along the trail.¹⁷

The Nez Perce children were primarily cared for and tended to by their grandparents. Boys learned how to do things, like fish, hunt, and ride a horse, from their grandfathers. The Nez Perce were fond of ceremonies. For boys, a feast was held to celebrate the killing of their wild game, while girls were given a ceremony to celebrate their first root digging. The heads of families arranged weddings, and there were cases of childhood betrothal. The Nez Perce practiced slavery and polygamy, and men were known to take a slave as a second wife.¹⁸

The typical Nez Perce warrior fought in bands of close, well-trained men who were tenacious fighters, masters of their weaponry, and excellent horsemen. Though their traditional weapons were primitive compared to the rifle, pistol, and cannon used by US soldiers, they were no less deadly when properly applied in combat, and the Nez Perce used them very well and quite often while hunting, competing in games, rites of passage, and fighting rival Indians. As rifles were added to their repertoire, the addition of deadly firepower increased their prowess as warriors and made them even more fearsome as a cunning enemy who mixed their traditional ways of battle with the use of the white man's

weapons. By the time of the war in 1877, many of the Nez Perce warriors were indeed excellent marksmen able to deliver deadly accurate rifle shots into the ranks of their enemy.¹⁹ The Nez Perce, by observing and learning from other Indians and white men, picked up the use of tools and weapons that were previously foreign to them and adopted their uses for their own benefit.²⁰ By 1877, the Nez Perce had also developed decent skills in the use of sniper rifles. According to Ami Frank Mulford, the Nez Perce warriors were supplied with “long range needle-guns . . . [that] were [equipped] with the most approved telescopic sights.”²¹ Because the Army engaged the Nez Perce on trails located on traditional Indian hunting grounds familiar to them, the Indians held a distinct advantage. The Nez Perce were also better suited for living off the land more than the US soldiers, who were tied to supply trains, and they presented a cunning enemy who mixed the traditional Indian ways of battle with the use of the white man’s modern weapons.²² They also used the typical Indian tactics and they were well -respected fierce warriors within the Indian community.²³ The Indian’s training began at childhood, when the boys received training on how to become a warrior. The training, which was administered by the elders and other warriors from within their tribe, tested the young men’s courage, while strengthening their bodies and honing their skills through the use of traditional weapons, like the bow and arrow, knife, and lance. The Indian warriors used tactics that confused and surprised their army opponents. In *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890*, Robert M. Utley wrote: “He [the American Indian] excelled in guerilla warfare--at hit-and-run raids, at harassment, at exploitation. . . .as breech-loading, metallic-cartridge weapons, including repeaters, fell into his hands, he achieved a firepower that made him much more formidable than his forebears.”²⁴

Known by other nations of Indians and US Soldiers alike for their supreme horsemanship, the Nez Perce used the skills that earned them their great equestrian reputation to evade the pursuing Army by traversing terrain thought impassable by even the most hardened US Cavalryman. Writing about the Nez Perce, historian Roy P. Johnson published the first-hand accounts of Jacob Horner, who had been a sergeant in the US Army's 7th Cavalry from 1876 to 1881. Sergeant Horner actually participated in the historic Nez Perce campaign and was a member at the time of Chief Joseph's surrender. In his book, Mr. Johnson offers Sergeant Jacob Horner's description of fighting against the Nez Perce:

Horner watched the battle again. He marveled at the horsemanship and fighting skill of the Nez Perce, saying "They lay on the sides of their horses and fired under the horse's neck while going full speed."²⁵

The Nez Perce had acquired their first horses before Lewis and Clark discovered their people in 1805. It is believed that the first Nez Perce horses were purchased from the Shoshoni Indians. Before they adopted their first horses, the Nez Perce were sedentary villagers who survived primarily as fishermen and diggers of camas roots and did not roam widely. Therefore, the Nez Perce were most likely motivated to acquire the horses for prestige reasons. Those first horses were then distributed among various Nez Perce villages, and the news of the magnificent beast brought many onlookers who watched with amazement as the horses grazed. According to historian Robert Utley, "The Nez Perce say that they broke their first horses by loading them with skin pouches filled with stones to accustom the animals to carrying loads."²⁶ Over the years, as the Nez Perce learned more and more about their prized animal, they became known as master horsemen. Utley wrote, "The Nez Perce are the only tribe of Indians on record who

practiced selective breeding of livestock without being taught it by a civilized neighbor.”²⁷ Ultimately, the Nez Perce horses were developed into an animal superior to any of the other regional tribes. The Nez Perce loved their horses and knew how to get the best out of them in sport and war. As Jacob Horner witnessed in the Battle of White Bird Canyon, the Nez Perce warriors demonstrated great skill at riding quickly and firing while doing things, like hanging from the side of their mounts.²⁸ Their great horsemanship proved to be one of the most underestimated facets that faced the US Army. Both in its pursuit of the Nez Perce and during the war, the band combined the abilities of their great breed of horse with their people’s amazing equestrian abilities to traverse some of the roughest terrain in the West to their advantage.²⁹

Early records show that the Nez Perce Indians, originally made up of independent villages and bands, enjoyed a friendly relationship with white men with whom they came in contact. The journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark record the beginning of their peaceful relationship with whites as early as 1805.³⁰ After these explorers the Nez Perce welcomed fur trappers and missionaries into their territory, allowing them safe passage through the mountains, valleys, and rivers of their ancestral homeland. Those peaceful relations persisted until the Nez Perce War in 1877.³¹ Why then did the Nez Perce ultimately find it necessary to go to war with the US Government rather than submit to new treaties?

This question deserves to be answered since, from 1805 to shortly before the war in 1877, the Nez Perce had not been hostile toward white explorers or settlers. While the Nez Perce had been friendly, there is a great deal of information that documents acts of violence against whites by many other bands or tribes of American Indians.³² There is

little doubt that such information, widely known in white communities, built up a stereotypical fear and attitude among white citizens that “all Indians are bad.”³³ For example, the mutilation of Captain William J. Fetterman’s men at the hands of over 2,000 Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors led by Crazy Horse, Red Cloud’s fighting chief. In 1866 Captain Fetterman took his command of Company A, a detachment of Company C--along with a group of civilian volunteers--for a total of eighty men, to support an Army wood train detail that was under attack by a band of hostile Sioux Indians.³⁴

At the time of the mission, Fetterman was assigned to Fort Kearney, Wyoming, under the command of Colonel Henry Carrington. Fetterman was known to have been particularly contemptuous of the fighting ability of the Sioux and was looking for an opportunity to engage and defeat them. On 21 December 1866 he got his chance when he was sent out from Fort Kearney to rescue a work party that was being attacked on the plains. According to the historian Fairfax Downey, Captain Fetterman was quoted as having boasted, “Give me eighty men and I’ll march through the whole Sioux nation.”³⁵

Prior to moving his men to assist the work party, Captain Fetterman was given explicit written and verbal orders from Colonel Carrington not to pursue the Indians. Fetterman ignored his Colonel’s orders and led eighty-two men into a trap in which all were killed after being overwhelmed in the Indian’s ambush on that December morning.³⁶

After the battle, officers from units involved in negotiations with Indians found it, “a barely tolerable ordeal [to take part in] . . . smoking a peace pipe [with those] savages” who were strongly suspected as having “taken part in the ghastly mutilation of Fetterman’s dead.” Downey offers more vivid details of the massacre:

[An] Army Surgeon, who at a parley with the Cheyenne's, saw the scalp of five white women, hair neatly braided, hanging on the belt of a warrior [or the] . . . recently rescued two little girls who after the use of knives had been repeatedly raped. Or for any soldier, who had found the body of a comrade, forced to run with abdomen slashed open and intestines dragging [or] . . . the remains of a captive buried up to his chin near a red ant hill, scalped alive and left to the ants.³⁷

As stated, the Nez Perce had no part in these events; however, the incidents did affect the way many whites felt about all Indians. Philip Sheridan was appointed to take command of the Army Department of Missouri in September 1869. There he was ordered by General Sherman to subdue the Indians and place them on reservations. Several treaties were drawn up, few of which were kept due to the white man's desire for land near the Indian reservations.³⁸ Because of the attitudes held by whites toward Indians; the perception of injustices committed against them and the fact that so many treaties were broken, it is easy to understand how an attitude of distrust occurred among Native Americans; a distrust that contributed to the ultimate decision of the Nez Perce chiefs to refuse more talk of treaties and to call for war.

It should be noted that Indian acts of cruelty and violence were not reserved for whites only. Indians were equally hard on each other, both in war as well as punishment for crimes.³⁹ During the Nez Perce War the Assiniboin and Lemhis Indians joined ranks with the US Army, and some warriors from those bands attacked the Nez Perce on the Milk River.⁴⁰ To further explain the nature of American Indian culture, one must try to understand their ethics and conduct. In *Frontier Regulars*, Utley wrote:

Despite cultural diversity, the tribes shared certain characteristics that had important military implications. One was this very diversity. People accorded their allegiance to the family, band, and tribe, and only vaguely if at all to the race. They viewed themselves not as Indians but as Sioux or Nez Perce or Apache. They fought one another more often than they fought the whites.⁴¹

Common among most Indians is the fact that they showed little mercy when administering punishment for acts of dishonesty and cowardliness. An example of such harshness is the punishment forced on a slave of one band of Western Plains Indians, whom the Nez Perce called Seeskoomkee for “no feet,” also known as Itskimze Kin, for “feet and hands cut off.”⁴² While he was a slave of another Western Plains Indian tribe, he was shackled outside on a winter’s night as punishment for stealing. During the night both of his feet and one hand froze resulting in the loss of all three appendages.⁴³ Though the story of Seeskoomkee can be used to show that some Indians were guilty of harsh treatment, his story can also be used to illustrate an Indian’s compassion and loyalty.⁴⁴ After fleeing those who had enslaved him, Seeskoomkee was taken in by Chief Joseph’s village where he was given his freedom and partial tribal status as a Nez Perce. After the Nez Perce showed him kindness and allowed him into their village as a free man, he became very loyal to them. Prior to the Battle of Whitebird Canyon, Seeskoomkee was riding apart from the village to serve as a lookout, when he discovered that an Army unit was pursuing the fleeing Nez Perce. He proved his sense of loyalty and honor by ignoring his own safety and quickly riding to issue an alarm to the village to let them know that the Army troops were on their way.⁴⁵

While there is a long history of violence between whites and Indians, as well as among Indians themselves, the Nez Perce are specifically not known for such acts against whites.⁴⁶ The first documented violence committed by a Nez Perce against a white person occurred on 14 June 1877, during the Wahlitits Sarpsis Raid.⁴⁷ After that raid, relations ultimately disintegrated between the Nez Perce and the US Government, just as it had between other Indian tribes and the government. So, why did a group of young Nez

Perce warriors feel compelled to commit murder against white settlers; an act of violence that led to the Nez Perce War?

The critical reason is the stereotypes and cultural differences that led to the injustices and misunderstandings between the Nez Perce and whites and were major contributors that led to the violence. One example of these stereotypes is the one captured in the writings of Ami Frank Mulford. After a visit to an Indian village established at Fort Rice where a branch of Crow, Reeve, and Sioux Indians were encamped, Mr. Mulford wrote: “The stench is terrible. . . . [T]hey are dirty, lousy, and lazy. . . . Indians and a lice are the closest of neighbors, and have much in common. This is all there is of an Indian.”⁴⁸ These types of cultural misunderstandings directly led to the outbreak of hostilities between the Nez Perce and the government and later contributed to the failings of the US Army to decisively defeat the Nez Perce once the war began by causing members of the Army to underestimate the Nez Perce because they saw the Indians as being inferior to whites.

Though many Army leaders knew of the Nez Perce peaceful reputation, the prevailing attitude was that held for all Indians: Indians were racially inferior to whites and must ultimately be removed from their land and placed on government reservations. Though the Army’s leaders knew that many Indians could and would fight for their land, they seemed to believe that the more advanced, civilized, and intellectually superior white man could easily defeat them. That attitude caused the Army’s leaders to underestimate the Nez Perce in various battles.⁴⁹ It will be demonstrated that these types of cultural differences between whites and Indians led to the US Government making

crucial mistakes in the mid-to-late eighteen hundreds, by underestimating a people who were faced with not only losing their land but also their very way of life.

To further illustrate the complexity of the Nez Perce, it should be noted that their people were divided into two camps: those who entered into treaties with the US Government and those who refused. For the nontreaty Nez Perce, surrendering possession of their land was the key issue. The nontreaty Nez Perce refused the government's treaties and chose to go to war with the US, rather than accept another directive to move onto a smaller reservation.

Prior to the outbreak of war, Chief Joseph's band did initially comply with the government's directive to move from their tribal land in Oregon, but they were not at all happy about leaving. Though unhappy with the directive to vacate their land in only one month, but believing military resistance was futile, Joseph and the other chiefs of the Nez Perce counsel reluctantly agreed to lead their people toward Idaho. Around 350 members of the nontreaty band chose to follow their chiefs to Whitebird Creek. They never got there because, along the way about twenty Nez Perce warriors--enraged at what they saw as a lack of justice for their people and the loss of their homeland--staged a raid on nearby white settlements at Salmon River where three young Nez Perce warriors killed several white men.⁵⁰ Afterward, the Army immediately began to pursue the Nez Perce, and although he initially opposed it, Joseph decided to cast his lot with the chiefs who called for war.

During the course of the war, the Nez Perce chiefs performed oversight for functions, such as movement of the village, care for the women, children and elderly, and execution of the battles. As with other Indians, the Nez Perce chiefs, along with their

Shaman (medicine men or healers) and warriors, held the most respected and authoritative positions within the tribe.⁵¹ According to Robert Utley, “A war chief or leader of a war party did not ‘command.’ He led through personal influence. Warriors followed his direction only as it suited their inclination.”⁵² Critical to the understanding of the Nez Perce is a clear view of how the Nez Perce people chose their chiefs and a description of the relationship the chiefs had with their people; the methods they used to lead them, and how the chiefs came to their decisions on governing their villages and conducting the 1877 war. A full list of the chiefs and warriors who were the most prominent in the years leading up to and during the Nez Perce war is included in this study to illustrate how each one’s personality and leadership affected their tribe’s decisions and how those decisions affected the welfare of the Nez Perce tribes.⁵³

Most of the chiefs and top warriors of the nontreaty Nez Perce were killed at The Battle of Bear’s Paw; many of whom were shot accidentally by fellow Nez Perce warriors during the confusion of battle. Some of the survivors went to live out their years on the reservation established for the Nez Perce at Lapwai. Others went to the Colville Indian reservation at Nespelem, Washington. Chief Joseph, the Nez Perce most famous leader, was taken to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, after his surrender to live as an exiled leader. Though many people relate the nontreaty band of Nez Perce in 1877 with the younger Chief Joseph, there was actually a group of chiefs who held levels of authority equal to or above his.⁵⁴ Among those were the chiefs responsible for the battlefield successes that have been described as “brilliant” and “masterful” by many US Army leaders, including General Sherman.⁵⁵

Each Nez Perce village had its own chief, who was usually selected from the top three or four of the older men from within the village. The selected chiefs gathered in informal groups where they held councils to determine the welfare of the village and to help settle arguments and put right any wrongdoings among their people. Those men who did become chiefs, however, led their people in different ways based on the way they rose to their position of authority (i.e., as great warriors, visionaries, healers, or educators, etc.). In the Nez Perce tradition, a man achieved a position of honor or leadership among his people for displaying courage or heroism above other members of the tribe. Though no one in the village was obligated to obey the decisions of their chiefs, they usually did so out of reverence or peer pressure. Though no chief had an obligation to become a warrior, he gained more of a following if he did so and proved himself to be brave in battle.⁵⁶

Because the Nez Perce people depended on their chiefs for leadership, and their warriors for survival, a complete list of the most well-known and influential Nez Perce chiefs and warriors is provided in Appendix B of this paper to illustrate the character of each man, along with their relationship with the US Government. The following names are provided to familiarize the reader with the most well known Nez Perce who participated in the war in 1877: Chief Joseph (younger), Looking Glass, Tom Hill (Hustul), Ollocot, Yellow Wolf, Wottolen, Toohoolhoolzote, Rainbow and Five Wounds.⁵⁷ All of these men fought fiercely to protect their people and culture, in their stand against the Army. Though they were successful in many battles with the Army, their efforts were ultimately in vain, as many of them died in the Nez Perce War, with the survivors living in exile--a broken people. After five days of fighting in the Bear Paw

Mountains, Chief Joseph walked out to Generals Howard and Miles, held out his rifle and cried:

I am tired of fighting. . . . I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. . . . [M]y heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.⁵⁸

This chapter has examined the Nez Perce Indian analyzing their people to determine the reasons they were able to fight so successfully during their war with the US Government. Chapter 3 examines the US Government's strategy for western expansion, its policies toward Indians, and the politics involved in managing the Army. It also explains the reasons US land treaty negotiations often failed to be resolved peacefully, such as the one that compelled the Nez Perce to enter into the war that led to the suffering and exile of their once great tribe.

¹*Idaho Semi-Weekly World* (Idaho City, Idaho Territory), August 1877.

²L. V. McWhorter, *Hear Me My Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1952), 1.

³Francis Haines, *The Nez Percés: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 8.

⁴McWhorter, 3.

⁵Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 316.

⁶McWhorter, 3.

⁷*Ibid.*, 2.

⁸McWhorter, 81.

⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion," in *14th Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1892-93), 725.

- ¹¹Ibid., 656.
- ¹²McWhorter, 75.
- ¹³Ibid., 174.
- ¹⁴Ibid., 240-41.
- ¹⁵*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, available from <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9044001>; Internet; accessed on 27 November 2004;
- ¹⁶McWhorter, 9-12.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 405.
- ¹⁸Merrill Beal, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), 10. McWhorter, 8.
- ¹⁹Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians! In the United States Cavalry, Custer's Favorite Regiment* (Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1972), 119.
- ²⁰Utley, 18.
- ²¹Ibid., 6.
- ²²Ibid., 8-11.
- ²³Ibid., 5.
- ²⁴Ibid., 6.
- ²⁵Roy Johnson, *Jacob Horner of the Seventh Cavalry* (The State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1949), 19.
- ²⁶Utley, 19.
- ²⁷Beal, 10.
- ²⁸McWhorter, 248-249.
- ²⁹Johnson, 21.
- ³⁰Haines, 27.
- ³¹Ibid., 29.
- ³²McWhorter, 3.

³³Fairfax Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 46.

³⁴Henry B. Carrington, "Official Report of the Philip Kearney Massacre," 3 January 1867, Letters Received, Departments of the Platte, Records of the United States Army Commands, Record Group 393, National Archives. The document is reproduced in a number of Congressional reports and in H. B. Carrington, *The Indian Question* (Boston: DeWofe and Fiske, 1909), 22.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

³⁷Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 133.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

³⁹Utley, 6.

⁴⁰McWhorter, 518.

⁴¹Utley, 5.

⁴²McWhorter, 237.

⁴³Bruce Hampton, *Children of Grace: The Nez Perce War of 1877* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994), 154.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵McWhorter, 237.

⁴⁶Haines, 207.

⁴⁷Beal, 46.

⁴⁸Mulford, 50.

⁴⁹Wooster, 37.

⁵⁰McWhorter, 506.

⁵¹Utley, 5-6.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 5-7.

⁵³McWhorter, 503-4; and Utley, 315.

⁵⁴Ibid., 15-16.

⁵⁵Hampton, 27-30, 32.

⁵⁶Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1969), 77-79.

⁵⁷McWhorter, 43, 283.

⁵⁸Hampton, 307

CHAPTER 3

UNITED STATES POLICY AND STRATEGY FOR WESTERN EXPANSION

We ourselves by unnecessary delay are depriving the Army on the frontier of those means for the preservation of their lives and the defense of the country, which they have a right to demand. We leave them without pay, without support, without arms, without artillery, without food; and yet we command them to defend the flag of their country.¹

Congressional Testimony, 1866

To understand the conditions that set the stage for the conduct of war, this chapter establishes the boundaries for employment of the Army in pursuit and battle with hostile Indians. Chapter 3 also addresses the difficulties experienced by the US Government during its negotiations with American Indians located throughout the western plains during the mid-to-late eighteen hundreds, and the government's strategy for national security and western expansion. To understand why the US Army failed to achieve decisive victory during any of the battles fought against the Nez Perce in the 1877 war, this chapter will illustrate that serious leadership problems existed in the government both before and during the war that directly affected the Army's ability to fight.

When examining the Nez Perce Indians, it becomes evident that their strength was their warrior culture, superior mobility, and strong leadership, from their council of chiefs; all of which combined to make them a very worthy opponent in battle.

In retrospect, it seems reasonable to think that the Nez Perce War might have been avoided all together, if the US Government had used better diplomacy, enforced the law, and sought justice for several Nez Perce men who had been needlessly murdered by local settlers. Also, if the government would have honored the original land treaties of

1855 and 1863, which stipulated the Indians could stay on their land in the Wallowa Valley. Chief Joseph indicated his feelings prior to the start of the war in 1877, when he said, “War can be avoided and ought to be avoided. I want no war.” ²

Poor diplomacy was a key issue that led to the Nez Perce War. If the Nez Perce chiefs would have had reason to trust the government’s agents and felt confident that they would be treated fairly during treaty negotiations, they might have been able to maintain calm among their people. After all, the Nez Perce had been friendly toward whites since they first met during the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805. Furthermore, if Howard’s command had not moved so quickly toward a forceful removal, the Nez Perce might not have felt so hopeless and threatened.

Nevertheless, the chiefs did agree to move as directed by General Howard. As they began their journey to Idaho, Chief Joseph learned that three young Nez Perce men, who were enraged at the loss of their homeland, had massacred a group of white settlers. Fearing US Army retaliation, the chief began what is now known as one of the greatest military retreats in American history. While fleeing eastward over the Buffalo Trail (Lolo Trail) to Montana, the nontreaty Nez Perce fought several battles with Army units commanded by General Howard and settler volunteers. At first, the Nez Perce believed the Army and volunteers were just chasing them out of Idaho, and that they would be safe in Montana. They intended to travel peacefully to a place where they could escape hostilities and someday return to their homeland, not realizing that the US Government intended to move or eliminate them.

To help explain the government’s strategy for dealing with the Nez Perce, it is important to understand the mentality of the US leadership toward Indians prior to the

Nez Perce War. In 1866, illustrating the cynical policy toward Indians, which was prominent among the men who ran the government at that time, the US Secretary of the Interior wrote: “It has been the settled policy of the government . . . to establish the various tribes upon suitable reservations and there protect and subsist them until they can be taught to cultivate the soil and sustain themselves.”³ These comments show that the government deemed Indians as needing to be converted to the white way of living to survive, which is ironic because the Indians had lived on the land without the government’s assistance for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

Another indictment of the attitude of the leadership is seen in the words of General Sherman, who on 26 September 1876, said: “These Indians require to be soundly whipped . . . and the ringleaders in the present trouble hung, their ponies killed, and such destruction of their property as will make them very poor.”⁴ With the Army’s mission to protect US interest and provide national security came a plethora of hardships for the frontier soldier. Some of the problems made more of an impact on the soldier’s psychological welfare than others. For example, in addition to enduring the normal hardships of frontier duty, the mission to carry out the military strategy of total war created an ethical dilemma for many men who were disgusted by the practice of shooting into the tents of villages as they knowingly killed women and children in an attempt to break the spirit of the tribe. Because senior Army officers in 1877 were all veterans of the Civil War, they understood that operational art was aimed at attacking an enemy’s decisive strategic points or decisive points. When the Army was assigned the mission of eliminating the Nez Perce will to resist, thus forcing them onto the reservations, the Army’s leadership made plans that focused on attacking their decisive strategic points.

One way the Army attempted to eliminate the Indian's strength and crush his will to fight was to strike his village to eliminate his source of sustenance and support, to surprise and kill his warriors, and to remove his superior mobility by scattering his horses during the attack. Though most Army officers reportedly tried not to kill women and children, the Army's total war campaign plan directed at attacking hostile villages often resulted in the death of noncombatant women and children. Nineteenth-century humanitarians were appalled by the practice of total war, while the top US leaders refused to acknowledge the practice as genocide.

Another approach toward the conquest of Indians was the recruitment of Indian scouts to fight along side the Army in battles with other Indians. General Crook started the practice in the 1870s. Crook described the idea of using Indians against Indians by saying "to polish a diamond there is nothing like its own dust."⁵ General Howard subscribed to the practice when he employed twenty-two Bannock scouts to assist him in his pursuit and fight against the Nez Perce. Howard's actions demonstrates a great example of putting ones morals aside to accomplish the mission as seen in his tolerance of his Bannock scout's atrocious acts while under his command. Though he was known to be a staunch Christian and had used his faith as a reason to go to war with the "savage heathen Indian," the General turned a blind eye to the Bannock scouts who mutilated fallen Nez Perce they discovered along the trail during the Nez Perce War.⁶ While pursuing the Nez Perce, General Howard reported the atrocities, but did nothing to stop them. Howard wrote:

See these women's bodies disinterred by our own ferocious Bannock scouts! See how they pierce and dishonor their poor, harmless forms, and carry off their

scalps! Our officers sadly look upon the scene and then, as by common impulse, deepen their beds and cover them with earth.⁷

By 1867, the government had appropriated that 226 military posts, 17 armories, and 4 depots be built and maintained for the protection of the US citizens and national resources nationwide. This was a monumental task to be accomplished by the number of officers and enlisted men that was stationed at strategic locations throughout the country. At the time, the Army was a relatively small force that had been drawn down in size shortly after the 1865 conclusion of the US civil war. The 1874 Authorization Act put the Army's strength at 27,000 officers and men, but because the rate of fills compared to the number listed on paper were different--the existence of high desertion rates due to low morale and low end strength due to illnesses and disease, the entire US Army's actual number was much less, at around 25,000.⁸

Under President Johnson's administration, the Army Reorganization Act was approved on 28 July 1866. The act directed the Army to go from six to ten regiments, but the new regiments were to be much smaller, also. In 1876 Congress had not specified numerical end strength for the Army that was headed by four geographic commands and had no brigades, divisions, or corps headquarter.

During the Nez Perce War, the War Department experienced a tumultuous period for its leadership where the head of that department changed several times over a short period of time. In 1877, the Army was under a dual chain of command called the "coordinate system."⁹ The administrative direction came from the Secretary of War, William W. Belknap. Belknap was responsible for the Army administration and reported to President of the United States Ulysses S. Grant. Belknap directly or indirectly controlled all the military divisions during peacetime. However, upon the commencement

of military operations, orders would be directed through the headquarters of the Army led by Commanding General of the Army, William Tecumseh Sherman. In 1876, William T. Sherman had been acting informally as Secretary of the War Department. President Ulysses S. Grant picked William Worth Belknap to become his Secretary of War in 1869. Belknap served there until 1876 before resigning his post amidst accusations of corruption. Afterward, President Grant was appointed in March 1876, and three months later the Attorney General of the United States appointed Taft Secretary of War. J. Donald Cameron then took the job and served until 1877. George Washington McCrary served as the Secretary of War under President Rutherford B. Hayes from 1877 to 1879, before resigning. The Army chain of command at the time of the Nez Perce War is depicted in figure 10.

Organization Chart

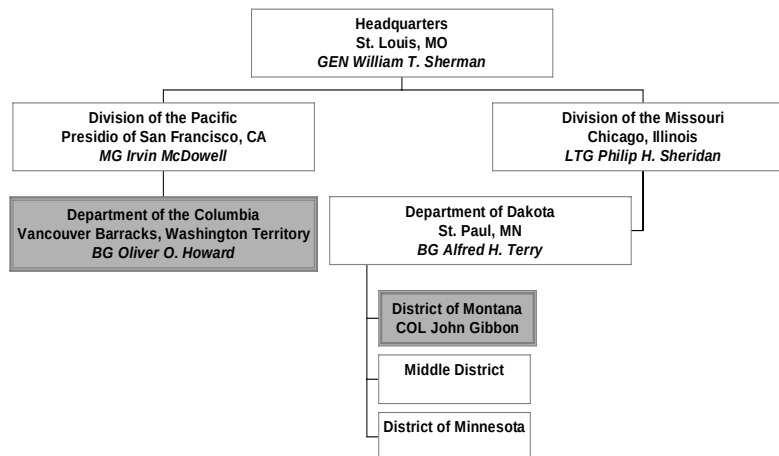


Figure 10. Organization Chart

Source: Organization chart taken from briefing prepared by Major David Christensen, DMH, USACGSC, from briefing presented during Nez Perce Day, University of Saint Mary, Leavenworth, KS, 20 November 2004.

During the Nez Perce War, the Army employed six to ten regiments that were formed from two African-American cavalry, four African-American infantry, and four infantry regiments from the Veteran Reserve Corps, which was filled by men wounded during the Civil War. Soldiers who could not longer perform the rigorous duties on the frontier, but were still able to do garrison work manned the Veteran Reserve Corp.¹⁰

The heart and soul of the Frontier Army was the company, and each company's strength was set at fifty to one hundred enlisted men. This low end strength compelled commanding officers to group companies together to accomplish a mission.¹¹ Expressing his dissatisfaction with the organization, General Sherman commented, "Such companies are almost ridiculous . . . compelling commanding officers to group two and even four companies together to perform the work of one."¹²

One of the main strengths of the Frontier Army was its linear firepower. When employed at the proper location and time, the Army could deliver a massive and devastating amount of firepower on the enemy. Because the Nez Perce were excellent marksmen and because they had many rifles equivalent to the US soldiers, the ability to employ and sustain the linear firepower was a crucial element for the Army commanders.

One of the weapons Army commanders depended on to deliver that firepower was the rifle, but from the end of the Civil War until a few years before the Nez Perce War, the men in blue had to rely on obsolete rifles that had good range, but were slow to load and fire. This out-dated rifle was the Spencer carbine which had a maximum effective range of only 300 yards and was often criticized for being unreliable due to the cartridge extraction system that caused difficulties for the soldiers trying to remove the spent round. The problem was that the material used for the cartridge often galvanized into the

breech after the heat generated from firing caused a chemical reaction with the metal of the rifle.

After a few poor showings in fights with hostile Indians, the Army realized the need to upgrade to more modern and reliable firearms and convened a commission in 1873 to consider several models and select one that would best serve its needs. The commission chose the Springfield trapdoor rifle and carbine as its new weapons. Although a single-shot weapon, the Springfield was a breech-loader and, in the hands of trained soldiers, could be fired twelve to thirteen times a minute. However, the real advantage of the Springfield was its range and accuracy, especially in comparison with shorter range and underpowered repeating rifles. The combination of long-range, high-powered rifles with plentiful and standardized ammunition gave the Army an advantage in firepower over its enemies.¹³

The Army's battle formations also provided an advantage in linear firepower. The standard Army formation for frontier fighting was the dismounted skirmish line, whether an infantry or cavalry force. With a disciplined and centrally organized force, the Army was able to increase its concentration of firepower by using linear formations. These formations were able to withstand enemy assaults and deliver devastating fire against any mass of defended forces.¹⁴

After the Fetterman massacre, Congress allocated funding for the procurement of the more-effective Springfield weapon in July of 1867, and the Army immediately replaced its muzzle-loading rifles with the Springfield breech-loading rifles. The Springfield rifle had a higher rate of fire than the muzzle-loading rifle and became the one commonly used by soldiers to patrol the western frontier.¹⁵

When one thinks of the Frontier Army, visions of proud cavalymen on horses charging across the plains to engage hostile Indians usually come to mind. However, most soldiers in the US Army were infantrymen who marched to every engagement, and though the cavalry did play a crucial part in the Indian wars, an infantryman could be trained and equipped at about one-third the cost. The Sioux Indians called the infantry “walk-a-heaps” and were impressed by the soldier’s ability to march over great distances in extreme weather.¹⁶ Furthermore, the infantry had more troops and regiments than the cavalry and artillery combined, and infantrymen could be deployed in more restrictive areas, while providing massive fire power at longer range--firepower that could effectively wipe out the enemy.

At the time of the Nez Perce War, the cavalry doctrine directed four different types of procedures. A cavalry commander could order an attack by charge, a dismounted attack or support of another element, a mounted fire maneuver, or an area recon mission. The cavalry’s strength was its ability to shock the enemy with speed and break up the enemy with concentrated mass, combined with employment of saber, pistol, and rifle.

For the Army to keep pace with the mobility of the Indians with their limited force, it continually increased the percentage of cavalry strength in comparison to infantry strength within the total authorized manpower. When the cavalry dismounted, one in four soldiers was designated as horse holder. This immediately reduced the firepower of cavalry formations by 25 percent. The cavalry also used a .45-caliber, 55-grain cartridge in its carbine in comparison with the rifle’s .45-caliber, 70-grain cartridge, which meant that the cavalry’s carbine had less range in comparison with the rifle. Though it is true that these disadvantages weakened the cavalry’s firepower, the Army

accepted the risks as the advantage gained by the cavalry's mobility offset the shortcoming.¹⁷

The Gatling gun was classified as artillery and was intended to support the infantry and cavalry. One reason it was not used much during the Indian wars is because it was notorious for jamming during firing. Because of its deficiencies, the Gatling gun did not serve a major role during the Indian wars, but was used in a few minor battles as support and employed in the Nez Perce War against the Looking Glass village by Captain Whipple's company, which was under General Howard's order to seize Chief Looking Glass and all that he owned.

The Army's artillery units were employed as either heavy batteries or light companies. Artillery units could provide massive firepower from a distance, and were used to demoralize the enemy. Though it did play a role in several important battles with Indians--especially as a method of total war--and, in the defense of Army posts, it was not routinely used on the plains due to the expense of maintaining it; the resources needed to support it; and, the difficulty of traversing the rugged trails with it.

Another of the difficulties for the US Army in 1877, when hostilities began with the Nez Perce, was that the Army was a relatively small force that had been drawn down in size shortly after the conclusion of the US civil war in 1865.¹⁸ With the 1874 Authorization Act putting the Army's strength at 27,000 officers and men the task of securing the western plains was difficult enough, but for several reasons, the Army's actual numbers were much less due to soldiers lost to illnesses, diseases, and high desertion rates.¹⁹

The men who deserted undoubtedly had different reasons for leaving their posts, and it is probably true that not all deserters were cowards in the true sense of the word. Among the reasons for desertion was poor leadership. A complaint from the average enlisted man was the relationship he had with his officers.²⁰ Ami Frank Mulford, who served in the 7th Cavalry Regiment in 1877 described the officer-enlisted relationship in the following way.

As a rule an Army officer does not mix with or recognize the fact that enlisted men have any rights or attributes to be respected. There is, socially, an impassable gulf between enlisted men and their officers--I qualify this broad statement by adding, "with rare exceptions." General George A. Custer was one of the rare exceptions.²¹

Furthermore, because the frontier soldiers were away from their families and had nothing to do when they were not fighting hostile Indians or performing their soldierly duties, they often turned to drinking, gambling, or fighting as a way to occupy their time. The typical enlisted man in the Army during the mid-to-late eighteen hundreds was largely uneducated and tough. Utley described the post-Civil War Army as:

Criminals, brutes, perverts, and drunkards, to name a few. But there were also active youths seeking adventure, men of varying ability fleeing misfortune, and foreign paupers who turned out to be excellent soldiers.²²

Along with personnel issues, the Frontier Army was affected by post-war restructuring which altered the size and composition of its force. History suggests that the government typically draws down the Army after a war: however, this particular drawdown, which was mainly brought on by political and financial reasons, came at a time when the Army was heavily tasked with conducting border security and with keeping the Indians under control.

Why did the US Government scale down its army even though a number of Plains Indian tribes were still hostile? To understand this action, it is necessary to examine the political climate of the time, which was formed by the four painfully divisive years of Civil War and the Southern Reconstruction conflict. Another reason for the drawdown was to redirect monetary sources toward the postwar debt. The Civil War had been a costly campaign, and the surrender of the southern states removed the need for a large Army and offered the government a means to cut its budget. Of course, southern politics also had an impact on the government's decision. With each passing year, the protest against having a Union Army occupation of the defeated South grew stronger and created a power struggle between Democrats and Republicans that existed for many years after the Civil War.²³

The Army of 1877 was relatively small and it inherited many soldiers who were seasoned by years of hard battle. However, it also inherited a lot of older senior officers who at times struggled with fighting against the unorthodox Indian warriors.²⁴ Following the Civil War, the Army realized the need for an updated war doctrine. At the time of the Nez Perce War, the Army was going through a transition period to adopt and train to the new war doctrine that had been developed by Brevet General Emory Upton and General William Tecumseh Sherman. From 1870 to 1875, General Upton served as the Commandant of the United States Military Academy at West Point. During that time Upton was appointed to the "board to assimilate the tactics," and his system, modified for artillery and cavalry, was also accepted. Because of his book, he was considered an authority on the subject of military tactics during the Indian campaigns, and in 1867 his system for infantry tactics was adopted.²⁵

Another problem, which complicated this period of change for the Army, was the lack of understanding of the Indian's culture, and fighting style. This lack of understanding often resulted in miscalculations and underestimations being made that led to the Army getting out maneuvered, outflanked, and soundly beaten in some battles with Western Plains Indians.²⁶ As the Army began incorporating a new doctrine for fighting, some units were caught unprepared as they entered into battles with the unorthodox Indians.²⁷ Army losses, such as the Fetterman massacre; Custer's disaster at the Battle of Little Big Horn, and Captain Perry's defeat by the Nez Perce at the Whitebird Canyon, shocked the government and nation and demonstrated that the Indians were very good at compensating for inferior numbers and firepower through the use of deception and guerrilla tactics. These tactics combined with stealth of movement and warrior training resulted in their catching the soldiers confused and off balance in the fog of war.²⁸ The lack of quality training further contributed to the Army's failures, as the lack of manpower and money prevented any type of realistic training for frontier soldiers. Many men assigned to the cavalry had no riding skills and only limited marksmanship training with their weapons; there was no formal marksmanship training program established until the late 1890s.

For the relatively small army, protecting the territory west of the Mississippi by manning over two-hundred military posts, arsenals, depots, and armories was a monumental task.²⁹ Before the completion of extended railroads, army units had to move exclusively on foot or horseback.

A point of shame for the government was that the soldiers who were protecting the country's settlers and national resources by manning and maintaining remote forts

and outpost often worked without pay. Because Congress failed to appropriate funds, the Army's soldiers went without pay from 30 June until 8 November 1877. President Hayes issued a message to the Special Session of the Forty-Fifth Congress on 16 October, pointing out the travesty and recommending that "Congress be convened in advance of the time prescribed by law," suggesting that an appropriation for a strength of 25,000 for that fiscal year be approved, leaving debate for what the Army's end strength should held during future discussions.³⁰

Going without pay was reason enough to lower the soldiers' morale, but whether paid or not, the soldiers had reasons for poor morale as life in the Frontier Army was not easy. Soldiers on the frontier often endured extreme hardships marching and riding for an average of twenty-five miles, to as many as sixty miles a day in all sorts of weather. In pursuit of the Nez Perce, Colonel Sturgis' men completed a sixty-mile forced march up from the Tongue River. Whether walking or riding a horse, traveling such a distance was an incredible feat, especially considering that the unit had to bring along such a massive logistics tail to support each operation.

Another issue on the topic of equipment was the problem with deploying the crew served weapons. A lack of equal mobility was one of the biggest deficiencies for the Army pursuing the agile Nez Perce. Mobility of the columns was extremely difficult due to the weight of the wagons, the length of the supply trains, and the limitations of traversing mountainous or wooded terrain. The 6th Infantry Colonel William B. Hazen stated, "After the fourth day's march of a mixed command, the horse does not march any faster than the foot soldier, and after the seventh day, the foot soldier begins to outmarch the horse."³¹

Describing life on the trail while searching for hostile Indians in 1876, former enlisted man Ami Mulford wrote:

May 17th--this morning it rained [again] and the wind was so strong that it was almost impossible to keep a tent up. So we stood around in the rain, and after vain attempts to keep our fires going, we just stood and shivered. . . . May 21st--It is still raining. Anything dropped is pretty much sure to get lost. It is astonishing how deep the mud can get. . . . [T]he mud is so deep that six mules haul a wagon that is only partly loaded. . . . [W]e go over a mile from camp to get wood. Such is our life on the Upper Missouri [sic].³²

Though the duty was extremely difficult for enlisted men in the Frontier Army, the principal cause of desertion was due to the poor treatment many men received from their officers. Some officers looked down on their men and failed to recognize that the enlisted soldiers had needs. Mulford said, "I know of commissioned officers whose evil ways are notorious."³³ Some officers reportedly applied the most rigid discipline upon their men. Historian J. D. Foner wrote: "In 1868, an officer admitted to summarily inflicting such punishments as tying by the wrists and thumbs [of soldiers], 'bucking' and 'gagging'."³⁴

It is true that some of the officers had poor relationships with their men, but the poor attitude of some leaders may be explained by reviewing the mission Army commanders had to accomplish during the 1800s. Protecting the nation's borders and citizens while providing security to over two hundred forts and outpost in defense of national resources was a monumental feat. The command climate is easily explained by an analysis of the conditions officers had to perform under. All of their missions had to be accomplished short of adequate funds, equipment, and training; and with many men suffering from low morale and possessing poor character traits.

Though the Army suffered from all of these problems, the US Government and military organization should not carry all of the blame for its failures. The blame for some of its failures and defeats should be directly attributed to the Indian's prowess and fighting ability in battle. As General Pickett, Division Commander of the Army of Virginia, was quoted as saying after having been asked what caused the Confederate Army's terrific loss at the battle of Gettysburg: "I think the Union Army had something to do with it."³⁵ Likewise, the Indians had something to do with the difficulties encountered by the US Army.

The Nez Perce were a proud, intelligent tribe with braves who were extremely skilled in the art of war.³⁶ They were also talented horsemen who reportedly fought better mounted than on their feet. They routinely proved their talent for mounted combat demonstrating that they could ride hard, fast, and evasively. Jacob Horner gave an eyewitness account of such horsemanship, "They [Nez Perce] fired under the horse's neck while going at full speed."³⁷ The accounts of their actions--in defense of their village at Big Hole--demonstrated their skill and tenacity on foot, when attacked by surprise, and forced to fight dismounted.³⁸

Just as the Indians suffered while traveling over the immense western frontier, so did the Army. A study of the conditions endured by the men during the pursuit of the Nez Perce illustrates how physically challenging it was to be an Indian-fighting soldier in the Frontier Army. There is a great deal of information that supports the fact that soldiers in the Army of the eighteen hundreds endured extreme human challenges and physical hardships. It was expected for the Army's infantry soldiers to march in the line of duty, but many soldiers in the Cavalry were also without horses. From marching or riding an

average of eight to twenty-eight miles per day in all sorts of inclement weather, to making camp on rough-terrain, then sleeping on the hard, muddy, or frozen ground, to subsisting on a diet of hard tack, salt pork, berries and coffee, the men had it hard.³⁹ It was not uncommon for soldiers to burn their clothing after a mission of several days on the trail. After following in the thick dust stirred by the wagon trains and going many days in sporadic downpours of rain, the filth became so ingrained that scrubbing could not clean the cloth. Therefore, it became necessary to simply burn the clothing and procure more to wear during their time spent in forts.⁴⁰

The combination of fighting with a relatively small force against a determined foe was in itself enough of a challenge for the Army. Add to this problem the severely harsh terrain, weather, and physical challenges, along with some poor leadership, and one can begin to understand why the Army had such a difficult time achieving decisive victory during the 1877 campaign.

¹*Congressional Record*, 45 Cong., 1 Session. VI, 285-329.

²Francis Haines, *The Nez Perce: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 214.

³Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 7-8.

⁴*Ibid.*, 145.

⁵Merrill Beal, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press), 143.

⁶*Ibid.*, 41-2.

⁷*Ibid.*, 43.

⁸*Congressional Record*, 45 Cong., 1 Session, VI, 58.

⁹Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 20-21.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), 22.

¹²Utley, 16.

¹³United States Army, Ordnance Department, *Description and Rules for the Management of the Springfield Rifle, Carbine and Army Revolvers, 1874*, (Meriden, CT: The Meriden Gravure Company, 1960), 4, 29

¹⁴Utley, 72-3.

¹⁵Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 43-44.

¹⁶Clayton K. S. Chun, *US Army in the Plains Indian Wars, 1865-91* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 9.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁸Weigley, 267.

¹⁹Wooster, 30.

²⁰Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians! In the United States Cavalry, Custer's Favorite Regiment* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1972), 56.

²¹*Ibid.*, 57.

²²Utley, 23.

²³*Ibid.*, 10-12.

²⁴Fairfax Downey, *Indian Fighting Army* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 407.

²⁵Chun, 54-55.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 202.

²⁷Wooster, 32.

²⁸Downey, 204-205.

- ²⁹Utley, 47
- ³⁰*Cong. Record*, 45 Cong., 1 Sess., VI, 58
- ³¹Utley, 50.
- ³²Mulford, 78.
- ³³*Ibid.*, 56.
- ³⁴J. D. Foner, *The United States Soldier Between Two Wars* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), 60.
- ³⁵Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Third Day at Gettysburg and Beyond* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 84.
- ³⁶L.V. McWhorter, *Hear me my Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1952), 307.
- ³⁷Roy Johnson, *Jacob Horner of the Seventh Cavalry* (Bismark, ND: The State Historical Society, 1949), 19.
- ³⁸Beal, 117.
- ³⁹Mulford, 116-117.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 70.

CHAPTER 4

ARMY OPERATIONS AND TACTICS DURING THE NEZ PERCE WAR

General Howard was not versed in Indian warfare. He found there is a vast difference between Agency life and its treaty making and fighting Indians.¹

Ami Frank Mulford, “Fighting Indians”

How did the Nez Perce, for all of their military weaknesses, evade and defeat the US Army’s attempt to capture them in the winter of 1877?

Chapter 2 established the strengths and weaknesses of the nontreaty Nez Perce in this pursuit. Chapter 3 described the conditions under which Army commanders and their soldiers operated during the Nez Perce War. Chapter 3 also set the stage for the conduct of war, by establishing the US strategy and policy for national security during the middle eighteen hundreds, and delivering insight into the conditions Army commanders and their soldiers operated under during the Nez Perce War.

This chapter focuses on the Army’s failures at the operational and tactical level, and illuminates the following five important issues that significantly contributed to US failures during the Nez Perce War: problems with US policy and guidance regarding the removal of Western Plains Indians from their land to US reservations (specifically the nontreaty Nez Perce); troubles with Army sustainment; a clash of cultures, ideologies and hegemony; poor US leadership; and Army organization pitfalls.

These failures prevented the Army from decisively defeating the Nez Perce until a mere forty miles from freedom before Colonel Miles finally cut them off on their escape route at the Bear Paw Mountains. After four months of evasion interspersed with fierce fighting, the Nez Perce thought they had eluded General Howard and were free to enter

into Canadian refuge in September 1877. With this false sense of security, the Indians stopped overnight and camped. This single action allowed Miles to catch them before they could reach Chief Sitting Bull's Sioux Indian village, located just across the Canadian border from the Bear Paw Mountains in Montana.²

Problems with US Policy and Guidance Regarding the Nontreaty Nez Perce

Many of the Army's problems were directly due to political pressure from the US Government and Army chain-of-command. After the Civil War the government's official policies and strategic goals to settle the western frontier changed often. Public opinion, the press, discoveries of gold and silver, and political infighting between Republicans and Democrats often caused abrupt reversals of settled policy. Also troubling for commanders in the field was that the US Government provided vague and inconsistent strategic guidance to the Army's leadership. During the Nez Perce War, the lack of clear and consistent guidance led to some Army officers giving indecisive guidance to their subordinates involved in various battles with the Nez Perce. Some examples are illustrated in the messages General Sherman sent to General Howard while Howard pursued the Nez Perce. On 4 August, Sherman wrote: "I would like to consult with you and feel your absence much . . . see no reason for your commanding a department after having driven hostile Indians out of your department."³ On 24 August, after having pushed his unit to near exhaustion in pursuit of the Nez Perce, Howard telegraphed Sherman, "I think I may stop near where I am, and in a few days work my way back to Fort Boise slowly."⁴ Sherman answered, "That force of yours should pursue the Nez Perces to the death, lead where they may. . . . [I]f you are tired, give the command to

some young energetic officer.”⁵ Then, in his annual report, Sherman later acknowledged the need for Howard to stop to rest his men and horses and to resupply. Sherman wrote:

I recognized the full measure of the labors, exposure, fatigue, and fighting of General Howard and his command, having personally seen much of the route over which he passed and knowing the great difficulty of procuring food for men and horses in that mountain region. It is simply impossible for infantry or cavalry with their single horses to overtake Indians, who drive along a herd, changing from a tired horse to one comparatively fresh at pleasure, knowing the country perfectly, ready to hide in the many rocky canons [*sic*], ravines, and dense woods in which that country abound, and able with a small rear-guard to hold at bay any number in pursuit, who often for miles must follow trails in single file.⁶

Most importantly, for over fifteen years, prior to the Nez Perce conflict the US Government had struggled to deal with the debt, loss of economic growth, destruction of the national infrastructure, and expensive southern Reconstruction following the Civil War. The Army was forced to campaign to clear the West of hostile Indians without money to adequately support the force with much needed equipment and pay for soldiers.⁷ Anti-Reconstruction Congressmen cut Army funding as a way to force the Army from the South. Another by-product of the four-year-long Civil War was the lack of public support for military conflict. When the Army’s campaign to clear the Western Frontier of hostile Indians intensified, the support needed by commanders to quickly and decisively subdue the Indians was absent. Some members of Congress actually opposed bills to fund the Army for soldier’s pay, equipment, and scouts, on this account leaving the Army without adequate amounts of weapons, ammunition, and reconnaissance support. Prior to the 1867-1868 Indian campaigns General Hancock suggested in his report to General Sherman that action against the Indians “only be conducted during the winter months due to insufficient supplies to sustain the Army, and the potentially

devastating effects on [Indian] horses of a winter campaign” Sherman replied, “now is the time for action,” and refused Hancock’s advice to wait.⁸

Troubles with Army Sustainment

When General Howard pressed the Nez Perce toward war in the spring of 1877, he worked to one of the Indian strengths, which was their mobility. Pressing the Nez Perce to battle at that time of year was a mistake because the Indian’s horses would have plenty of grass to sustain them in the spring and summer months, and because that time of year provided the warriors and their village with ample sustenance as well.

Unlike the Indians who traveled light and lived off of the earth, supplying the Frontier Army was a massive and expensive ordeal. In June 1865 President Grant described the cost of maintaining the cavalry operating in the Great Plains campaigns as “enormous,” noting that in only scattered Indian campaigns that year the government had spent over \$20 million.⁹ Even with the huge expense, soldiers often had to go without some supplies while they waited for the trains to catch up. On the trail with General Sturgis, Ami Mulford found that supplies were often short during Indian campaigns. It is not that the soldiers never got them, but that the long wagon trains frequently lagged behind the maneuvering units. On 17 June 1877, Mulford wrote, “We are again short rations.” On 18 September 1877, Mulford wrote again, “If this is a war of attrition, they [Nez Perce] were getting the food and we were getting the appetites.”¹⁰

During the Nez Perce War, General Miles had to stop at the Tongue River to allow his supply trains of forty wagons, and numerous pack mules to catch up with his command. There, for two reasons he split his force. One was to insure that if the Indians somehow got ahead of him they could be stopped by one of his elements. The second

reason was to ensure that he would be able to get at least part of his large force safely across the deep river before the Cow Island crossing. Unfortunately for Miles, he learned the following day that the agile Nez Perce--who were free of such rigid supply requirements--had already crossed the river and were again making a good pace toward freedom. Meanwhile, Miles' unit lost several of its pack mules when they fell over a cliff.

A Clash of Cultures, Ideologies, and Hegemony

By the time of the 1877 negotiations, the white men had unfortunately established themselves as dishonest and overly aggressive toward Indians by breaking treaties and not fulfilling promises before negotiations began with the Nez Perce.

Prior to the Nez Perce War, a US delegation met with the nontreaty band's chiefs several times in late 1876 and early 1877 to discuss a land treaty that had been agreed upon by Nez Perce council in 1855. US Indian Agent Monteith, General Howard, and Major Wood were the most experienced men of the government's delegation dealing with the Nez Perce chiefs in 1877, but even with their experience they failed to understand the chief's position on the treaty of 1855. The US delegation also failed to understand the hierarchy of the chiefs representing the nontreaty Nez Perce. An example of the magnitude of the government's misunderstanding can be seen in the way the agents insisted upon placing Chief Reuben in charge of the Nez Perce after the death of Chief Lawyer. The government failed to realize the cultural significance of the Indian's warrior culture as an important qualifier for picking their leaders. When the Nez Perce tried to pick a replacement for Lawyer, they looked within their village for someone brave and powerful. In the meantime the government tried to raise Reuben to the position of chief because he was a docile and mild-mannered man, traits that disqualified him as a chief in

the eyes of the Nez Perce, who wanted someone strong, brave, and charismatic. The Nez Perce chose Looking Glass, White Bird, and Toohoolhoolzote as the men to lead them, as these men had all proven their bravery and strong medicine. Young Joseph was not yet selected the position of chief by the Nez Perce, but several US leaders and national newspapers announced the government's backing of him as another chief due to his personal wealth, impressive personality, and intellect.¹¹

This is a great example of how cultural ignorance led to political blundering by the government as demonstrated by the fact that Toohoolhoolzote was insulted and even jailed by General Howard during the treaty talks. Toohoolhoolzote was the one Howard and the US delegation should have wooed, because he was one of the Indians selected to be a chief, whereas Joseph had not yet been given that distinction at the beginning of the negotiations.¹² Prior to these negotiations, Howard had been known as a communicator and diplomat. He had used his personal gifts and skills to work for causes, like the Freedman's Act and other philanthropic movements. However, when he engaged with Chief Toohoolhoolzote, his demeanor changed from that of a diplomat to a hard-line Army officer who would not tolerate any challenge to his authority. Howard's actions against the well-respected chief were seen as a great insult to the other Nez Perce Chiefs and led to the failing of the land negotiations.¹³

Another example of poor diplomacy is illuminated by the analysis of the attack on Chief Looking Glass' village. This attack illustrates how the feelings held by US leaders directly led to the Nez Perce War; a war that occurred as a result of years of poor diplomacy, cultural misunderstandings and broken promises on behalf of the government. Examples of poor leadership, flawed decision-making, and ineffective command and

control are seen prior to and during the attack on the Looking Glass band in June 1877.

Historian Francis Haines in *The Nez Perces* describes the transaction between General

Howard and Captain Whipple. Haines wrote:

While General Howard was engaged in this futile pursuit, he had given substantial reinforcements to his enemy by a rather stupid and wholly dishonorable act. . . . [M]ost of the Wallowa band, including some of Joseph's immediate relatives had moved to the Looking Glass village when the big camp broke up at Lake Tolo. These Indians had stayed away from the fighting at first. Now a few of the young men slipped away and joined the hostile group. Howard considered this cause enough for a surprise raid on Looking Glass and his camp, so he sent Captain Whipple against the camp with no orders to treat the Indians well, or to respect their property.¹⁴

On 29 June, two companies under the command of Captain Whipple followed General Howard's instructions to "Surprise and capture this chief and all that belonged to him. . . . [And the prisoners were to be turned over]. . . for safe keeping. . . . [To the volunteers of Mount Idaho]." ¹⁵ Note that Howard's instructions were vague and left Whipple in a position to initiate his actions violently. After receiving Howard's orders, and moving by a forced march, Captain Whipple's troops stopped near a creek in the vicinity of Looking Glass's village to observe the band. Seeing them across the nearby creek, Peopeo Tholekt reported that he was urged by Looking Glass to go talk to the soldiers to tell them to "leave us alone. . . . [W]e are living here peacefully and want no trouble."¹⁶

Before the outbreak of hostilities with the Nez Perce, government representatives might have fostered better relationships through cultural awareness of the Plains Indians, rather than remaining bound to the old stereotypes and prejudices that plagued treaty negotiations with the Nez Perce. Prior to the Nez Perce War, the US had already fought against many different tribes (or nations) of Indians and had gained knowledge from the

battles about how the Indian lived and fought. While gaining general knowledge about the Indian, the government's leadership discovered certain characteristics that led to an altering of the way the Army attacked Indians.

An example of the dangers of sending troops to negotiate or fight while intoxicated is illustrated by the words of Peopeo Tholekt after his meeting with a group of the soldiers to parley. Tholekt said, "They [soldiers] gave them [Nez Perce] the message, but then [were] taunted by some of the soldiers who appeared to have been "full of drink."¹⁷ One of the soldiers supposedly jabbed Tholekt in the ribs with a rifle, and told him that he "better go back and tell Looking glass to come out."¹⁸ Afterward, at the direction of Looking Glass, an old Indian named Kalowet raised a white cloth on a pole between Looking Glass's tent and the creek in site of the soldiers. Afterward on the morning of 1 July, a group of Nez Perce went out to have a brief parley with the soldiers. During the parley, one of the men in blue reportedly exclaimed, "That is looking Glass! I shall kill him now!"¹⁹ Then, armed with Gatling guns the soldiers attacked the Looking Glass village while many of the Indians--tired from the previous weeks of battle and flight were fast asleep. The massive fire killed women and children along with the warriors. Even with the surprise attack and having suffered great loses, the Nez Perce were able to rally and escape the Army where they could link up with Joseph's band, now more enraged than ever and determined to fight the Army. Hearing of the events General Howard lamented, "Of course this stirred up a new hornet's nest, and did not get Looking Glass and his treacherous companions into custody."²⁰

Shortcomings of the US Leadership during the Nez Perce War

For four months, ten different Army units fought against Chief Joseph's impressive band of around eight hundred Nez Perce Indians. During those four months, some of the toughest battles were fought by the troops under the command of Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard. Born on 8 November 1830 in Leeds, Maine, General O. O. Howard was known--at the time of the Nez Perce War--as the one-armed praying general. Howard University was named in his honor after he helped found the all-black college in the District of Columbia.²¹

Throughout his long military career Howard had been a controversial leader who gained victory by the force of his own moral convictions as often as by force of arms. He was a man with deep religious convictions, but he lacked the personality and leadership style to earn him admiration from his men. Though he attained a general's rank and received accolades later in life, a review of his early experiences as a Civil War commander is not flattering. In 1861, during his first battle as a Union Commander of the 3rd Maine Volunteer Regiment, which was later switched to a Brigade Command, Lieutenant Howard was routed, along with the rest of the Union Army at the First Battle of Bull Run, and he fared no better during his subsequent commands being routinely beaten by Confederate forces at various battles. During one such defeat, while leading a charge at the Battle of Fair Oaks in 1862, he received wounds that led to the amputation of his right arm and was haunted by his terrific defeat at the Battle Chancellorsville. Prior to the Battle of Chancellorsville, May 1863, Howard promised General Hooker that he would take the necessary precautions to defend his Corp from an attack from the West. However, believing that the Confederate Army was in retreat, Howard neglected to

follow through with his promise. His failure led to the Eleventh Corps's humiliating defeat when Confederate General "Stonewall" Jackson led his 28,000-man Second Corp to attack Howard's unprotected right flank, routing the entire Eleventh Corps and allowing the right wing of General Joseph Hooker's Union army to collapse.

General Howard was a well-spoken and intelligent man who possessed good speaking skills and the ability to communicate issues to various special interest groups, like the Indians. Howard's diplomatic competence with the Indians was one thing; dealing with them in battle and on a protracted military campaign was quite another.

In early November 1876 the convening of the commission at Lapwai signaled the beginning of hostile relations between the US Government and the nontreaty Nez Perce. Among the five members of the US delegation were General Howard, Major H. Clay Wood, and US Indian Agent John Monteith. Before the council even began, all of the US representatives, except Major Wood, were convinced that the Nez Perce had become so influenced by Indian prophet Smohalla and the Dreamer religion that they were planning on exterminating the white man from their nation.²²

Although Chief Joseph did attend the council, he did not make haste getting there. His lack of urgency to address the demands of the government--that his people relinquish over one million acres, in return for six 20-acre parcels on the Lapwai Reservation--demonstrated a spirit of contempt and gave the US committee the impression that Joseph thought he was in a position to argue or refuse their directive. After Chief Joseph's band arrived at the meeting, Howard explained the requirements of the US Government for the Nez Perce to move onto the reservation. Although the tribesmen would be permitted to hunt and fish periodically in the Imnaha country, Joseph argued that the new treaty

violated the promise that had been made between agents and his father many years ago. The Nez Perce chiefs refused to relocate and declined the government's offer to buy what remained of their tribal land. They argued that the white man's great leader had promised that they could live in peace on their reservation. The chiefs reminded the commission that, in the past years the US Government had forced them to sign five different treaties that reduced their native land to a mere 10 percent of what it had once been. General Howard was sympathetic, but insisted that there was nothing that could be done about it. He informed the chief that, though they were friends, his men would "move the tribe by force if necessary."²³ Upon hearing the US delegation's demands, Joseph stated that, "When the creator made the earth, [He] made no marks, no lines of division or separation upon it." Joseph insisted that he did not want to move onto the reservation because his people would be subjected to the will of the US Government. He impressed upon the committee that he wanted to live in peace, but he also wanted to be free.²⁴ The council was unable to come to an agreement and adjourned, with Howard and Wood remaining optimistic that the US could avoid war with the Nez Perce, but due to Howard's distrust of the influence the Dreamer religion had on the Nez Perce, he seemed to have hardened his position against them.

The commission submitted their report to the Bureau of Indian Affairs recommending the removal of the leaders of the Dreamer religion to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma, unless the Nez Perce agreed to move to the reservation. The Bureau of Indian Affairs approved the report and in early January demanded that the Nez Perce move, but be given "reasonable time" for the move.²⁵ Mr. Moneith ignored the directive to give them reasonable time, and requested that Howard send troops of the 7th Cavalry

to the Wallawa Valley, while simultaneously sending a message to the Nez Perce demanding that they move by 1 April. Setting such an early (unreasonable) date caused a great point of friction with the Nez Perce people who were facing the tasks of moving their entire village across the Snake and Salmon Rivers during the early spring runoff period.

To hasten that process, Howard agreed to meet with Agent Monteith and representatives of the nontreaty Nez Perce at Fort Lapwai in May and impress upon them “the unalterable purpose of the Government.”²⁶ As a contingency and doubtless to intimidate the Nez Perce, Howard positioned cavalry at Lewiston and near the junction of the Grande Ronde River with the Snake. Elsewhere, more troops assembled to be brought forward if needed.

While Joseph did not attend that meeting, his brother Ollokot did and tried to convince the general of the people’s right to remain at Wallowa. “This is where we were born and raised,” he said. “It is our native country. It is impossible for us to leave.”²⁷ To Ollokot's protests, Howard replied only that the people must move. The councils were bitter and turbulent. Alarmed by the message from the Fort Walla Walla meeting, about fifty Nez Perce appeared on 4 May with Joseph and Ollokot, who requested that the proceedings be delayed until White Bird and his people arrived. Howard was adamant that the council begin, and he warned the Nez Perce that, while he was prepared to listen to them, “in any event, they were to obey the orders of the Government of the United States.”²⁸ Agent Monteith read aloud his instructions from Washington, and they were interpreted to the Indians. The Nez Perce, said Monteith, had not responded to his previous invitation to come, but now they must do so.

Howard then met with the Nez Perce council of Chiefs to discuss a new treaty that demanded the Nez Perce to move from their land and told them that hunting and fishing privileges in the Imnaha Valley were to be granted once the tribesmen settled on the reservation, but he counseled that further delay would cause troops to be sent after them. After Howard spoke, Nez Perce Chief Toohoolhoolzote became enraged and asked Howard, “What person pretends to divide the land, and put me on it?”²⁹

General Howard had lost his patience, and replied to Toohoolhoolzote, “I am that man. . . . I stand here for the President, and there is no spirit good or bad that will hinder me.”³⁰ Howard became furious and ordered Toohoolhoolzote to be remanded to Fort Lapwai, where he was placed under watch of an Army guard. Howard then asked Chiefs Joseph, White Bird, and Looking Glass if they would accompany him to look at the land on the reservation. Afterward, Howard thought the issue was concluded. He warned the Chiefs that they must not delay in complying with the move, or they might risk a confrontation with white settlers who were anxious to see them placed on the reservation.³¹

During the Nez Perce War, General Howard led his troops in a pursuit of the nontreaty band, while simultaneously enduring great pressure from Army Commander General William Tecumseh Sherman. During the course of the war, Sherman sent several letters to Howard by courier expressing his doubt for Howard’s ability to subdue the fleeing Nez Perce. One such letter from Sherman indicates that he thought Howard was too tired, and perhaps not capable, to continue the pursuit of the Nez Perce. In his letter, Sherman wrote:

I would like to consult with you and feel your absence much. . . [and] see no reason for your commanding a department after having driven hostile Indians out of your department. . . . I authorize you to transfer your command, in the field, to . . . Gilbert.³²

Determined to prove General Sherman and his civilian critics wrong, General Howard pushed his troops extremely hard in an attempt to subdue the Nez Perce, traveling over 1,200 miles in twenty-six days without rest. Though he did have many negative critics, Howard's efforts were not lost to everyone who followed his exploits. Describing Howard's spectacular efforts, Milton Kelly, Editor of the *Idaho Statesman* wrote:

General Howard wore out his command--men and horses--in the pursuit; making unprecedented forced marches. He and his men enduring every specis [sic] of hardship and privation; and that when he had driven the Indians to Yellowstone; the work was virtually taken out of his hands by other officers with fresh well equipped troops, for whom the capture was made comparatively easy.³³

Though General Sherman and his immediate boss, General McDowell, criticized him for taking a delay at Henry Lake to rest and replenish his forces, Howard undoubtedly did the right thing. By the time of the rest stop, Howard had a keen appreciation for the ability of the Nez Perce to fight and maneuver. He understood that if he was to keep up the pressure on the Nez Perce--and have the combat power needed to stop and defeat the phenomenal Indians, he would have to work aggressively to sustain his manpower and equipment.

Even though Howard steadily pushed his unit to travel at top speed, the Nez Perce were able to consistently stay in front of them. With no hope of catching the elusive Nez Perce and his men and horses utterly worn out, General Howard resorted to a brilliant strategy when--after making contact with General Miles at Fort Keogh, Montana--he deliberately slowed the pace of his march in order to deceive the Nez Perce into thinking

that they could relax their pace, setting the stage for Colonel Miles to cut them off. The written order from Howard was sent down the Yellowstone River by boat to Colonel Miles at Fort Keogh along with a duplicate note sent overland by mounted messenger.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood transcribed Howard's directive for Colonel Miles as follows:

Joseph and his band have eluded Sturgis and he is now continuing his retreat toward British Columbia, and we believe is aiming at refuge with Sitting Bull. He is traveling with women and children and wounded at a rate of about twenty-five miles a day; but he regulates his gait by ours. We will lessen our speed to about twelve miles a day and he will also slow down. Please at once take a diagonal line to head him off with all the force at your command, and when you have intercepted him send word to me immediately and I will by forced marching unite with you.³⁴

As General Howard continued his relentless pursuit--closing steadily--he lost the race he entered on 17 June 1877 to catch the fleeing Nez Perce, when Colonel Nelson A. Miles, who had led his troops on a remarkable 160-mile forced march after leaving Fort Keogh, caught the Nez Perce before they could escape across the Canadian border. On 30 September General Miles' 5th Infantry caught the battered Indians in their camp on the Snake River. There, just north of the Bear paw Mountains, he ordered an attack on the remnants of the nontreaty band of Nez Perce. The Nez Perce put up a brave five-day battle where they fought Miles' soldiers to a stalemate. Late in the battle, with General Howard's reinforcements closing fast, the Indian ponies stampeded, and their people exhausted, Chief Joseph and his weary band finally capitulated. Though not in a position to conduct forceful negotiations, Chief Joseph insisted that Colonel Miles, not General Howard, accept his surrender. Though it was Howard's own plan that enabled Miles to cut off the Nez Perce escape route, this was yet another disappointment in his mixed career.

Chief Joseph surrendered after five days of fighting in the Bear Paw Battle and was forced to move to the reservation in Oklahoma, which the Nez Perce called Eekish Pah, “the hot place.” After Joseph surrendered, he and his people were exiled for eight years before all of the survivors but Joseph were allowed to return home to Idaho territory.³⁵

On 1 July 1877 Chief Looking Glass’s village was attacked while his people were fast asleep. Prior to the attack on the Looking Glass village, Looking Glass, who was one of the most skilled Nez Perce warriors, had already made his intentions to stay out of the fight clear to Chief Joseph.

This example of the Army’s campaign plan indicates that the leadership lacked an important element of understanding its enemy. This continual underestimation of the warriors’ abilities, as well as the US leadership’s failure to accurately formulate a strategy for peace, led to protracted war with the Indian when it might have been avoided.

An in-depth review of the Army’s operational structure and strategy for fighting an irregular enemy identifies several weaknesses for the men in blue. As previously stated, it was expected that the Army would have an advantage over the Nez Perce and other Indian tribes and would easily defeat them in battle. However, further analysis shows that the Army’s shortcomings were not only its leadership problems, but also its ability to sustain combat power in the field. With the powerful and wealthy US Government backing the troops, the Army should have had a distinct advantage to sustain it for greater periods of time than the Indian, while maintaining the movement of troops and firepower to wear the Indians down over a period of time, then applying overwhelming firepower against the enemy at strategic locations.

Organizational Pitfalls of the Army During the Nez Perce War

The Army's organized force benefited from a system of support and sustainment that was derived from a more centralized government. Its massive logistical resources and reserve were unmatched by the Nez Perce, but at the operational level, the Army had one major weakness in relation to the Indians. A burden for the Army was that its lines of communication were so large and cumbersome that they constrained mobility and speed of operations, forcing commanders to reorganize their forces in an effort to increase mobility. Whereas the Nez Perce could live off the land for extended periods of time, Army forces could not. Each soldier required rations, and each Army horse required several pounds of feed per day.³⁶

At the tactical level the Army had two strengths, linear firepower and centralized leadership. These two tactical strengths dictated how the Army fought in relation to the Nez Perce and can be reduced to one major tactical advantage, which was its organized linear firepower. The first component of organized linear firepower was the Army's ability to apply overwhelming fire from rifles and light or heavy artillery. Because of this ability, the Army should have had a distinct advantage in this area, but it often failed to exploit it due to the difficulty of resupply over extremely long lines of communication and of the problems with deploying crew-served weapons in rough terrain. Another problem was that the Army's scaled-down structure prevented it from consistently applying overwhelming force at every location on the battlefield. This played into the guerrilla fighter's strength by allowing the more mobile Indian to move about in many directions and match their skilled warriors against the more stationary soldiers, who often

were no more well armed than the Indians due to funding issues and resupply deficiencies.

With all of its superior structure, training, firepower, and support, it seems that the Army's worst enemy during the Nez Perce war was often its own leadership, lack of discipline, and poor decision making. Some of the poor decisions made by the leadership in pursuit of the Nez Perce contributed to difficulties in catching the Indians as well as throwing the Army's strength off balance during some of the battles. Describing the Army's failures, Utley wrote:

From commanding general to post commander, the frontier army hung from a loose chain of command. In part this weakness was inherent in the continental dimensions of the army's tasks, the inadequacy of manpower and other resources allocated to it, the unclear division of responsibility within the Indian Bureau, and the ambiguous character of Indian relations. But also in part the weakness stemmed from a military system that reduced the commanding general to a figurehead.³⁷

As stated, one of the Nez Perce strengths was its superior mobility, plus great warriors. For the Army to defeat the Nez Perce, it needed to neutralize their strengths and exploit their weaknesses while taking advantage of its own strengths. During the course of the war, several difficulties arose that placed the Army off balance. As illustrated in chapter 1 in the descriptions that show the conduct of the battles of the Nez Perce War, those difficulties were: a lack of mobility, poor command and control, limited logistical support, and a lack of discipline.

The time of year in which the Army's campaign against the Nez Perce was undertaken demonstrates poor forethought by the government. Forcing the fight (through failed negotiations) with the Indians during the summer months of June through September ensured that the Nez Perce would have the resources needed to sustain their

horses, which played into their strength of superior mobility. Thus, when the personal relationships became strained during the land treaty negotiations, the government's representatives should have advised against forcing a decision until after summer. This would have placed the Nez Perce in a weaker position to refuse the government's directive to move to the reservation and might force them to comply without hostilities. Forcing the Nez Perce to move in May demonstrates (again) the government's underestimation of the Indians abilities. If General Howard would have taken seriously the prospect of war, he should have considered the danger of a summer campaign and worked harder to avoid one.

By the time of the Nez Perce War in 1877, the Army had already proven the effectiveness of winter campaigns against plains Indians. In 1868 General Sheridan ordered the Army to "swing with three swords at the winter camps of the Indians."³⁸

For example, on 27 November 1868 General George Custer defeated Chief Black Kettle's fifty-one Cheyenne lodges at the Washita Valley. Exploiting the effects bitter cold had on the village, Custer's 800-man strong 7th Cavalry caught the Indians by surprise earning a great victory for the Army. Not only was it difficult for the poorly equipped Indians to fight in the cold, they also lost the advantage of superior mobility because their horses could not get enough grass to sustain the strength needed to carry the warriors into battle.³⁹

¹Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians! In the United States Cavalry, Custer's Favorite Regiment* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1972), 119

²Merrill Beal, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), 218.

- ³Ibid., 309.
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵William Tecumseh Sherman, *Report of the General of Army*, Headquarters of the Army, Washington, DC, 7 November 1877, of the Annual Report of the Secretary of War on the Operations of the Department of the Fiscal Year Ending 30 June 1877 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1877), 9.
- ⁶Ibid., 12.
- ⁷Report of Brig. Gen. O. O. Howard, 27 August 1877, *House Exec Doc. 1*, pt. 2, 131.
- ⁸Wooster, 126.
- ⁹Ibid., 112-13.
- ¹⁰Mulford, 93; and 116.
- ¹¹Haines, 195-6.
- ¹²Ibid., 196.
- ¹³Mark H. Brown, *Flight of the Nez Perce* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1971; reprint, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 73-5.
- ¹⁴Haines, 231.
- ¹⁵L. V. McWhorter, *Hear me my Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1952), 263.
- ¹⁶Ibid., 262.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Ibid., 263.
- ²¹Hampton, 48.
- ²²Ibid., 44-5.
- ²³Utley, 297-98.
- ²⁴Ibid., 53.

- ²⁵Haines, 213.
- ²⁶Brown, 80-82.
- ²⁷McWhorter, 133.
- ²⁸Brown, 80-2.
- ²⁹Ibid., 82.
- ³⁰McWhorter, 166.
- ³¹Ibid., 166.
- ³²Brown, 340.
- ³³McWhorter, 244.
- ³⁴Wooster, 45.
- ³⁵McWhorter, 525.
- ³⁶Don Rickey Jr., *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, Publishing Division of the University, 1963), 219-221.
- ³⁷Utley, 35.
- ³⁸Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), 268.
- ³⁹Ibid., 269; and Utley, 150-51.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Army's Indian mission merits no consideration in determining its proper strength, organization, and composition.¹

General Winfield S. Hancock
1876 Congressional Testimony

To defeat ones enemy in combat, a commander must understand the enemy's motivations for fighting, his cultural influences, strengths, and weaknesses. Because the Nez Perce had not been an enemy to the US Government prior to 1877, the Army had no experience fighting them, and did not really know what to expect. What the Army could have done prior to forcing the Indians to hostile action was to conduct a review of the history of the Nez Perce and gather intelligence on their firepower and strength. One point the Army might have determined during that process was that, among the other warring Indians in the area, the Nez Perce were one of the most well respected and feared and that they were very proud people known for their intelligence, were a wealthy tribe that excelled in horsemanship, and were masters of traditional Indian and modern weaponry.²

Reviewing these facts demonstrates that the main contributor to the Army's failure was arrogance and poor leadership. Arrogance on behalf of the government pushed the Army to act hastily in forcing the Nez Perce to accept a treaty the chief's were adamantly against. The government's representatives should have used more patience and diplomacy during the land treaty negotiations. However, force and insult was injected instead of respect and patience.

The flight and fight was protracted beyond the time it should have taken to end it and bring the Nez Perce under control for a negotiated peace, because the Army's leadership failed to recognize the desperation of the Nez Perce. As a matter of record, the Nez Perce chiefs thought that they were simply being run out of Idaho, and that they would be allowed to return home after a brief skirmish. If the Nez Perce would have been told early on that they could stop fighting and return to Idaho if they would move to the reservation, the Army may have avoided several more battles with them.

During the pursuit, the government could have done a better job of dispatching communication to the chiefs that they should stop fighting and meet again, to try to resolve their differences. A report from General Howard after the Clearwater Battle indicates the Chief Joseph was prepared to surrender, and that he had sent a message to Howard stating that he would meet the General to discuss ending the fight. After receiving the message, Howard became jubilant and passed the word throughout his detachment of the pending cessation of hostilities. However it was not so, and there is speculation that Joseph changed his mind after conferring with his chiefs because they had developed such a dislike and mistrust of Howard. That incident was yet another example of failed diplomacy and poor communication on behalf of the government.³

Though Howard did fail to adequately end the war early either by decisive military victory or by good diplomacy, he was not deserving of all the blame that has been laid on him by members of the press and some within the Army. General Sherman is also to blame, because if he would not have dogged Howard so strongly by ordering him to "capture and kill" the Indians, Howard could have pulled back and allowed the

Nez Perce to calm down. Once the Nez Perce felt that they could relax, free of the constant threat of pursuit, they might have renegotiated for a peaceful coexistence.⁴

Finally, on the topic of Army operations and command and control, the method of forcing the Indians to fight by attacking their villages and enforcing total war was not advisable as used during the attack on the Looking Glass village. The attack turned out to be a decisive point, which favored the Nez Perce strength and will to fight instead of bolstering the Army's position.

As this thesis examines the effectiveness of the Army and the ability of its leadership to perform command and control over its units in battle, it is important to examine the Army's definition of command and control, which is the process through which the activities of military forces are directed, coordinated, and controlled to accomplish the mission. This process encompasses the personnel, equipment, and procedures necessary to gather and analysis information, to plan for what is to be done, and to supervise the execution of operation.⁵

Poor tactical decisions and miscalculations contributed to the Army making blunders during the Nez Perce War, but a lack of understanding the Nez Perce culture is what led to the war. This lack of understanding Indian culture might have been avoided if the government would have devised a plan to train its Indian agents and liaisons to negotiate better with the Nez Perce chiefs and shown more respect for the tenacity of a group of people faced with losing their native land and traditional way of life.

Prior to the Nez Perce War, there were many opportunities for the US Government to foster good relationships with Indians. During the era of western expansion--from 1862-1876--the US had experienced over a decade of treaties and war

with the following Plains Indians: The Santee Sioux, Cheyennes, Kiowas, Apaches, Comanches, Snakes, Modocs, Navahos, Blackfeet, and several delegations of the Sioux nation under Sitting Bull's leadership.⁶ All of these Indians had stood in the way of US expansion and had felt the sting of poor relations that occurred after the clash of two very different cultures.

Foremost in the argument of why the Army failed to defeat the Nez Perce is the issue of failed peace. Prior to the beginning of hostilities, Chief Joseph stated many times that he desired to avoid war at all cost. Though the two diverse and powerful cultures of the US Government and American Indian seemed destined for war, evidence shows that it may have been avoided if the government would have used better diplomacy during treaty negotiations with the Nez Perce council of chiefs. Before the war began in 1877, Chief Joseph said, "War can be avoided and ought to be avoided. I want no war."⁷ Joseph later said that "he would have given his own life if those white men who were killed by the young warriors could have been spared," thus preventing the war that became inevitable after the killings occurred.⁸

An analysis of the problems prevalent in the US Government before and during the Nez Perce War strongly suggests why the Army failed to achieve decisive victory during the war. First, during the time of the Nez Perce War, the Army was going through a period of changing doctrine and strategic guidance that led to indecisiveness and an atmosphere of poor leadership. That period of poor leadership prevailed during the middle eighteen hundreds and contributed to a lack of command control during engagements with the Nez Perce. Second, due to the great cost associated with the Civil War and battling hostile Indians, the government failed to adequately fund the Army.

This lack of funding impacted the commander's abilities to deliver overwhelming force against hostile Indians because of low manpower, obsolete equipment, and inadequate training.

Third, prior to the Nez Perce War, the Army force structure had undergone drastic downsizing that left units well below recommended manning strength, causing commanders to take measures, such as grouping multiple companies together just to make one complete company. Other Army limitations were with weaponry. The Army failed to achieve routine deployment of its artillery on rough trails. Then there were the issues of inadequate soldier training on weapons as well as a lack of ammunition for marksmanship training between conflicts. All of these factors contributed to the Army's failure to consistently apply superior firepower in battle in order to achieve decisive victory against the Nez Perce warriors.

Fourth, the caliber of soldier that fought the Indians was often less than stellar due to cultural issues with the type of men who became the soldiers who engaged the Nez Perce (largely uneducated, undisciplined with low morale, and prone to intoxication); as well as poor conditions for those soldiers in the field. Low morale can also be attributed to pay problems, poor training, and the hardships associated with soldiering in the Frontier Army. These conditions often led to alcohol abuse, which further compounded the problem of low morale.

Finally, the Nez Perce were intelligent and proud people, whose skilled warriors were worthy of their formidable reputation. However, due to the presence of cultural stereotypes, misunderstandings about Indian culture, and poor diplomacy, the once peaceful Nez Perce were compelled to war.

When examining the Army from 1865 thru 1877, several issues become evident in effecting the execution of the government at the strategic level, as well as the Army at the operational and tactical level. Issues such as bipartisan politics; the economic strain of conducting war, peacekeeping operations, the influence of personal prejudices, and hatreds toward Indians that existed within professional government organizations all led to indecisiveness, poor preparation for the Army, and poor support for its commanders. The Army's organization, doctrine, manpower, and composition which was designed to stand and fight on a linear battlefield were proven ineffective when they entered into battle with the highly mobile Plains Indian who fought with a hit-and-run, guerrilla-warfare style of combat.

This study has illustrated that the Army's problems were neither limited to its own shortcomings nor was it entirely the fault of the government. The Nez Perce Indians were formidable warriors who were filled with pride and represented the attributes and qualities of the greatness of the Native American Indian during the mid-eighteen hundreds.

Proving their worthiness by accomplishing one of the most remarkable feats of the Western Plains Indian Wars, the Nez Perce eluded and defeated the US Army for four months of war that included thirteen battles and engagements. An important reason for the army's failure was its lack of understanding the Nez Perce culture and fighting style. The Indian culture was based on war, and it exalted the warrior mentality of the men. From the time they were young boys the Nez Perce trained their sons to ride, count coups, and use all sorts of weapons. Viewing war as the most sublime achievement, the Indians raised their warriors to the highest levels of social status based upon their bravery

and fighting ability. Furthermore, the Nez Perce were a wealthy tribe that possessed many horses.⁹ Having so many horses available allowed the fleeing Indians to change their tired mounts with fresh ones much more often than the Army could. All of these factors enabled the Indians to out maneuver and out perform the army.

Another important factor that benefited the Nez Perce was the leadership that came from the council of Nez Perce Chiefs. Unlike the army officers who had to wait on long bureaucratic policies to be determined, and political decisions to be made, the Nez Perce were led by their local council of chiefs who were knowledgeable in the ways of war, and who held the needs to their village as the utmost priority. That social makeup enabled the Nez Perce chiefs to lead their band of fewer than 200 warriors with nearly 500 women, children, and stock in tow over 1,350 miles of mountainous terrain before they were finally cut off and stopped by Colonel Miles' force of 500 troops.

Though the Nez Perce fought a valiant and successful war, Chief Joseph finally surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles with General O. O. Howard present. Realizing that he was cut off by Miles and seeing his people suffering, Joseph decided to end the war that began in the Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon and stretched to within forty miles of his destination of sitting Bull's camp in Canada.

At the time of their surrender, the Nez Perce warriors had been reduced from fewer than three hundred to a mere eighty-seven men. Even in his dire condition, Joseph still held out for five days while he and his people endured a merciless winter storm. Joseph's decision to surrender was inevitable. His people had no food or blankets and would surely die if left to endure those conditions much longer.

After the war, General Sherman paid tribute to the Nez Perce performance when he said, “Thus terminated one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is any record. The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise.”¹⁰

The government attempted to place the Indians on reservations, reeducate their people, take away their warrior culture, Christianize them, and place their children in white schools. As a lesson for the current and future administrations, removing a basic right (such as freedom of religion) from any group of people--just like denying food, shelter, medical care--may lead to unrest and violence. The US Government learned that lesson the hard way with the Nez Perce. This lesson must be kept in mind during the global war on terrorism (GWOT), that in attempts to reform societies by adding freedom and democracy the US does not become perceived as taking away the indigenous culture.

Some of the same problems dealt with nearly 150 years ago are facing today's army; problems, such as understanding an enemy's culture, motivations, language, and religions views. Since the opening salvo of Operation Iraqi Freedom, US enemies have worked to exploit its weaknesses in the same way the Nez Perce did after observing the way the Frontier Army fought. The Nez Perce discovered that they were more successful against the larger, better-equipped Army when they used guerrilla warfare and hit-and-run tactics. The OIF and OEF insurgency has used the mountains, deserts, and villages to take the Army's heavy firepower out of the fight, in an attempt to force it to fight on their terms. They have perfected hiding in the cities and towns, just like the American Indian used the rugged terrain of the American West.

American military leaders seem to underestimate the opposition, especially in the early phases of battle. Like the Indian, the modern Iraqi or Afghanistan enemy is a master of low-budget weaponry. Although inferior to US weapons, they are still quite deadly. OIF and OEF insurgents fight in small bands under the leadership of Chieftains and look up to their leadership as spiritual advisors. These mentors command such dedication that their followers willingly fight for to the death.

The modern insurgent is not tied to a large logistics train like the one that supports America's troops. The insurgent is therefore able to move more freely, with less likelihood of detection and without the predictability of having to return to a large, stationary logistics base.

A practice that affected the motivation of soldiers and public opinion toward the Indian wars was the use of total war. That same condition presents itself in the current fight. While US soldiers conduct operations, they must remain true to their national values and personal convictions. When frustrated in the process of rooting out insurgents within cities and villages, they must enforce discipline to ensure that they do not commit murder, but retain the professional and ethical standards which made the US military great.

To identify the best strategy to defeating an enemy one must have a good knowledge of that enemy including detailed knowledge of how it organizes, fights, and make decisions, as well as its physical strengths and weaknesses.

A study of the Army's operational structure and strategy for fighting an irregular force in the mid-eighteen hundreds identifies several strengths. The force benefited from a system of sustainment that was derived from a more centralized government. No tribe

could match the Army's logistical resources and reserve. Conversely, the Army's very strengths became a burden, as the lines of communication were so cumbersome they constrained mobility and speed of operations, forcing commanders to reorganize their forces in an effort to increase mobility. Whereas the Nez Perce could live off the land, Army forces could not, each soldier required rations and each Army horse required several pounds of feed per day.

At the tactical level the Army had three strengths: linear firepower, centralized leadership, and disciplined troops.

This analysis of the campaign against the Nez Perce in 1877 demonstrates these strengths failed to produce the desired effects. The Army is formed around soldiers and depends on their discipline in battle. The Army of 1877 failed to exploit their power by failure to discipline firepower. If the soldiers and leadership would have succeeded in this area, the Army might have easily defeated the Nez Perce, because the Indian fought on his own in uncoordinated attacks, while the soldiers drilled to come on line to lay down a mass of firepower under support of the elements of command and control and lines of communications.

Even though the last major battle with Native American Indians took place over one hundred years ago, the modern government and Army would do well to examine the lessons learned by the leaders of the Nez Perce War and apply those lessons to the conduct of current small wars or insurgent operations.

¹Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indians, 1866-1891* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 45.

²Francis Haines, *The Nez Perce: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 18.

³L.V. McWhorter, *Hear me my Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, LTD., 1952), 329.

⁴Merrill Beal, I, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), 167.

⁵Department of the Army, FM 101-5-1, 2002

⁶Don Rickey Jr., *Forty Miles A Day on Beans and Hay* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, Publishing Division of the University, 1963), 9.

⁷Haines, 214.

⁸Beal, 49.

⁹Bill Gulick, *Chief Joseph Country, Land of the Nez Perce* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1981), 6-7.

¹⁰Beal, 266.

GLOSSARY

Decisive Victory. An unmistakable defeat of ones opponent during battle that renders its force combat ineffective and incapable of continuing the fight, or to maneuver freely at the conclusion of battle--defeated beyond doubt (FM 100-7).

Guerrilla Warfare. A type of military action using small mobile irregular forces to carry out surprise tactics against regular military forces.

Insurgent. A combatant or groups of combatants who fight in small bands under no specific direction, or having only loose leadership.

Linear Firepower. Having only one dimension related to a straight line, the ability to deliver fire against an enemy in combat from a weapon, weapons system, military unit, or position

APPENDIX A

ORDER OF BATTLE

Whitebird Canyon Battle

Captain David Perry, Commander
Companies F and G, 1st Cavalry Regiment,
Mount Idaho Volunteer Company.

Clearwater Battle

Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard, Commander
Captain Norwood's Cavalry Battalion: Companies B, E, F, G, L, 1st Cavalry Regiment.
Captain Miller's Artillery Battalion: Companies A, D, E, G, and M, 4th Artillery Regiment.
Captain Mile's Battalion: Companies B, C, D, E, H, and I of the 21st Infantry Regiment.
Idaho Volunteer Battalion (known as the Idaho 2d Volunteer Regiment) consisting of three volunteer companies: Lewis Volunteer Company, Dayton (WT) Volunteer Company, and the Mount Idaho Volunteer Company.

Kamiah Crossing Skirmish

Same units except Company E, 1st Cavalry, which buried the dead and escorted the wounded to Grangeville.

Big Hole Battle

Companies A, D, F, G, I, and K, 7th Infantry Regiment Stevensville Volunteer Company.

Bear Paw Mountain Battle

Companies B, F, G, and I of the 5th Infantry Regiment.
Companies A, D, and K of the 1st Cavalry Regiment.
Companies F, G, and H of the 2d Cavalry Regiment.

APPENDIX B

NEZ PERCE CHIEFS

The following is a partial list of the most well-known and influential Nez Perce chiefs and warriors, according to historians and primary source accounts from several Nez Perce Indians:

Chief Joseph (Elder): Also known as “Old Joseph,” he was born about 1785-90 near Wawawai, Washington and died in 1871 in the Wallowa Valley. The son of Wallamuutkin, “Old” Joseph converted to Christianity in 1839 and later changed his native name to take on the Christian moniker of Joseph. He was the father of the famous younger Chief Joseph, who gained notoriety during the Nez Perce War of 1877 and subsequent years. After converting to Christianity, “Old” Joseph briefly relocated his lodge to the Spalding Mission. He later became disillusioned with Spalding, tore up his Bible, and moved back to the Wallowa Valley, where in 1855 he became a key figure who helped negotiate the Walla Walla Treaty, which he eventually signed, along with fifty-eight other prominent headmen before later refuting the terms of the treaty.¹

Twisted Hair (Wilewmutnin): Twisted Hair was the father of Lawyer, who played a prominent role in the history of the Nez Perce people. Twisted Hair was the leader of the people who resided in the Orofino-Ahsahka area. It was Twisted Hair who met the Lewis and Clark Expedition at Weippe on 20 September 1805, as well as on their return trip in 1806.² While this critical meeting took place, the more-prominent leaders were away on a war expedition against the Shoshone, to the south. Because of this, the burden of whether to consider these strange new people as friend or foe and what was to be done after that was determined fell upon Twisted Hair.³

Tom Hill (Hustul): Fought in the Nez Perce War of 1877. He was strongly opposed to the Treaty of 1863 and any further accommodations with the whites as they had failed to honor or enforce provisions of the 1855 Treaty. During negotiations in 1863, the government argued in part that it could not remove Whites from reservation lands; and the government would be able to better protect Indians on the proposed smaller reservation. Tom Hill was correct, though the US Government agreed to enforce the provisions of the 1863 Treaty, it never did.⁴

Lawyer (Hallalhotcuut): Lawyer was the son of Twisted Hair. Lawyer was the leader of the Stites-Kamiah area, but was considered by government officials as “Head Chief” of the Nez Perce people. Lawyer sided with the Americans, as opposed to the British in the days of Joint Occupancy. Likewise, at the Battle of Pierre’s Hole in 1832, he fought along side white men against their Blackfeet foe. During that particular battle he received a severe wound in the hip, which compelled him to use a cane for the rest of his life. Lawyer also allied himself and sixty men, with Colonel Wright in 1858, where, in two battles, they delivered a sever defeat to the Spokane, Coeur d’Alene, Palouse, and Yakama. Lawyer always seemed to align himself on the side of survival, despite the expense. During the proceedings at the Walla Walla council, Isaac I. Stevens reaffirmed Lawyer’s title of chief though Apus Weyheyqt (Old Looking Glass) challenged that position. Because of Lawyer’s acceptance of Christianity and American policies toward the Nez Perce people, he has often been viewed as one of the most progressive leaders between the Nez Perce and the US Government during the tumultuous time.⁵

Ollocot: Brother to the younger Chief Joseph, Chief Ollokot was killed at The Battle of Bear’s Paw. He was among the council of Nez Perce chief’s who initially

wanted peace with the US Government, but when he saw that war was inevitable, he fought heroically in defense of his people.⁶

White Bird: White Bird was the headman of the Lamatta band, located on Whitebird Creek. White Bird was one of the most adamant against selling lands on which the Nez Perce resided during the 1863 Treaty proceedings. He was also a prominent, experienced leader among the nontreaty bands who were involved in the Nez Perce War of 1877. It was the men from White Bird's band that killed several settlers in the Salmon River area, which ignited the Nez Perce War of 1877. White Bird was one of the elder men who helped organize and rally the young warriors, which enabled them to retake the encampment that had been overtaken by the devastating initial assault of Gibbon and his forces. The scores of women, children, and fighting men who died as a result of this attack infuriated this proud leader, prompting him to call on the young men who "wanted to fight so badly" to respond.⁷ White Bird led a small group of followers from the Snake Creek Battle to the camp of Sitting Bull in the Cypress Hill.⁸

Looking Glass: In July 1874, at a battle on the mouth of Prior Creek, Montana, Looking Glass and his warriors allied themselves with the Crow to help them defeat the Sioux, who were mortal enemies of the Nez Perce. In appreciation for their support, the Crows offered to help the Nez Perce if they ever needed them in the future. Looking Glass believed the Crows would honor their earlier offer, so he sought an alliance with them. Later, after he entered the Nez Perce war and remembering the Crow's pledge, Looking Glass felt great anger with the Crows when they refused the Nez Perce request for support while they passed through Yellowstone Park. Though it is unlikely that he thought the Crows would join the Nez Perce in fighting General Howard's forces, since

by that time the Nez Perce chiefs were more interested in escape than battle.⁹ Prior to 1 July 1877, Chief Looking Glass had remained neutral to the plight on the other nontreaty Nez Perce under Chief Joseph. He only entered the conflict after his scouts and village were fired upon with two 1st Cavalry Gatling guns. A formidable warrior, Chief Looking Glass became the principal architect of many of the military strategies employed by the Nez Perce during the War in 1877. He was also a renowned buffalo hunter.

Yellow Wolf (Paxaat Tamkikeechet) or Five Times Looking Through (boyhood name): The nephew of young Joseph, Yellow Wolf was born in 1856 in the Wallowa Valley and died 21 August 1935 at Nespelem, Washington. He spent most of his early years around the Wallowa Valley, but also spent some time east of Lapwai, Idaho. Yellow Wolf took a prominent role in the Nez Perce War, taking part in every battle during the campaign. He chose not to surrender with Young Joseph at Snake Creek, but instead escaped to Sitting Bull's camp of exiled Hunkpapa Sioux in Canada. He eventually returned to Idaho, where he was arrested and sent to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Yellow Wolf was relocated permanently to the Colville Reservation in 1885. While on a hop picking excursion in the Yakama Valley he met the respected author known today as an authority on Nez Perce history and culture, Mr. L. V. McWhorter. Together with other respected Nez Perce tribesmen, Yellow Wolf helped Mr. McWhorter document the history and native customs of the Nez Perce as well as a re-creation of the events of the Nez Perce War.¹⁰

Wottolen: Father of Many Wounds (Sam Lott), Wottolen was a Nez Perce prophet and ferocious warrior in Nez Perce War of 1877. In a vision, he saw Snake Creek running red with the blood of US soldiers and his people, but his dream was not taken

seriously as some braves had gone out the day before and saw no signs of soldiers. Even great leaders, like Looking Glass, felt secure in the area, but Wottolen's dream foretold the truth, as the Nez Perce were attacked by surprise the next day and suffered many casualties. He was wounded at Camas Meadows and did not want to surrender with Chief Joseph at Bear's Paw, so he chose to escape to Canada where he and several other Nez Perce including Yellow Wolf, Peopeo Tholekt, Black Eagle, and Joseph's daughter, Kapkap Ponmi, received refuge from Sitting Bull at his Sioux village.¹¹

Toohoolhoolzote: Chief Toohoolhoolzote, whose band lived in the rough country between the Salmon and Snake rivers, spoke on behalf of the nontreaty Nez Perce. He had a fiery verbal exchange with General Howard, who responded with what he thought was an open mind--but was instead a great insult--another testament to the way many high-ranking Army officers misunderstood Native American custom and respect. After their historic verbal exchange over treaty negotiations, General Howard was quoted as referring to Chief Toohoolhoolzote as a "large, thick-headed, ugly savage of the worst type."¹²

Peopeo Tholekt (Bird Alighting, White Swan Alighting): Was born near Lapwai, Idaho sometime in the eighteen hundreds. He was the son of Peo peo Iy-iy-tomin (Pelican) and Ah-um-not or Wah-um-not, who was a sister of Young Joseph. During the time of the outbreak of the 1877 war, Peo peo Tholekt was under the leadership of Looking Glass. He was originally from the Salmon River area, but was actively involved in the Nez Perce War of 1877. In the Big Hole Battle he distinguished himself by assisting in overtaking and dismantling the Mountain Howitzer, which had twice been fired upon one of the Nez Perce encampments. Peo peo Tholekt was also with the famous

warrior Sapsis Ilpilp and saw him killed during the battle. During the Battle of Snake Creek, near the Bear Paw Mountains, Peo peo Tholekt again distinguished himself in a dual with a Cheyenne scout, who wore a full-length war bonnet. He exchanged several shots with the Cheyenne, finally dropping him from his horse, although the Cheyenne lived, he did so by being severely wounded from this particular engagement with this renowned Nez Perce warrior.¹³

Wahchumyus (Rainbow): Warrior of many battles, he claimed to have derived his power from the air and the rainbow which gave him might and power. He said that, like the Rainbow, his power could be not seen, nor could it be grasped. He led the Nez Perce warriors in several battles, including the Cottonwood skirmish.¹⁴

Pahkatos (Five Wounds): Excelled as a great warrior in Nez Perce tribal wars. Five Wounds rose to greatness along with the warrior Rainbow during the Nez Perce War while leading braves in the Clearwater Battle and Cottonwood skirmish.¹⁵

Chief Joseph (younger), (Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt or Thunder Rolling in the Mountains) (1840-1904): Born in 1840, the son of the elder Chief Joseph, he was great Native American leader, but contrary to popular belief, he did not play a leading role in making the military decisions during the Nez Perce War. Instead, the campaign that has been described as military genius by General Sherman was led by war chiefs, such as Looking Glass, White Bird, Lean Elk, Toohoolhoolzote, and Joseph's own brother Ollocot. Chief Joseph's operational responsibility during the war was as "caretaker" of the Nez Perce people.¹⁶ He executed that responsibility very well considering the circumstances that faced him in 1877. He was initially against the war with the US Government, but supported it only after he saw that it was an inevitable event. Before the

events that led to war, Chief Joseph was quoted as saying: “Rather than go to war, I would give up my country. . . . I would give up everything.”¹⁷ During the war, he earned even more respect when he directed his warriors not to scalp or mutilate US soldiers whom they killed in battle.¹⁸ After winning in several engagements against the superior numbers of the US Army, he was forced to surrender: his warriors and chiefs nearly all killed and his people and horses worn out and starving. After surrendering in October 1877 to General Nelson A. Miles, who had cut him off at Eagle Creek, Montana, he was taken captive. Afterward, he was imprisoned at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and later, the Colville Indian Reservation where he spent the rest of his life struggling to restore his people’s freedoms, ancestral lands, and the right to worship and live as they chose. While at Fort Leavenworth, he made a trip to Washington, D.C., and gave eloquent speeches and requests on behalf of his people. His profound and simple logic influenced President Rutherford B. Hayes and members of Congress who eventually allowed the surviving Nez Perce people to return to their native land to live on the reservation (though Joseph was never allowed to do so). Over the years, his principles of kindness, his gift of speech, and his humbleness earned him a great deal of admiration and respect from white leaders and citizen’s worldwide. Steadfast in his principles and beliefs until death, Joseph essentially lived the remainder of his life as a political prisoner from 1877 until his death on 21 September 1904, on the Colville Reservation.¹⁹

¹Bruce Hampton, *Children of Grace: The Nez Perce War of 1877* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994), 28-30.

²Merrill Beal, *I will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), 15.

³*Ibid.*, 27, 296.

- ⁴Hampton, 42.
- ⁵Ibid., 28-30.
- ⁶Ibid., 296.
- ⁷L. V. McWhorter, *Hear Me My Chiefs: Nez Perce History and Legend* (Caldwell, Idaho, The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1952), 383.
- ⁸Ibid., 379-80.
- ⁹Francis Haines, *The Nez Perce: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 208-01.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 512.
- ¹¹Hampton, 208, 211, 289, 304.
- ¹²McWhorter, 159-60.
- ¹³Ibid., 43, 283.
- ¹⁴Ibid., 28.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid., 43, 313, 315.
- ¹⁷Felix Sutton, *Indian Chiefs of the West* (New York, Julian Messner, 1970), 59-60.
- ¹⁸Ibid., 61.
- ¹⁹Norman Bancroft Hunt, *Native Americans: The Life and Culture of the North American Indian* (New York: Mallard Press, 1991), 108.

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